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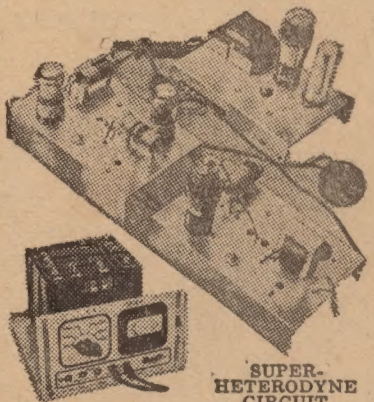

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THE DIME NOVEL

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EDITOR
D. McILWRAITH

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
LAMONT BUCHANAN

November 10th, 1946

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WILLIAM J. DELANEY, *President and Treasurer.* M. DELANEY, *Secretary.*

The Story Tellers' Circle

Tradition of Violence

WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE'S sidelights on his stories are always interesting. He has this to say to us apropos of his latest yarn "New Chum."

"About the time Billy the Kid was riding the New Mexico brush country and Jesse James was holding up trains in Missouri, different branches of my family were migrating from Britain to America, India, South Africa, Australia, and Canada. An older cousin of ours went to New South Wales and sent us back a newspaper with two pages covering the last stand of the famous Kelly gang of bushrangers.

"A few months later my father moved from London to the American Southwest and bought cattle there. Arkansas was a young untamed state in those days. Among the men I knew were a dozen or more who had killed one or more with whom they had quarreled. The Civil War was so recent that its memory of violence was still unsettling. For adventure one did not have to look so far afield as the antipodes. But Australia held the charm of the unknown. It was a topsy-turvey country which celebrated Christmas in the heat of the summer, one with a flora and fauna altogether different from ours.

"It too was a cattle country, but one with a terminology unlike our own. A mob of scrubbers at a muster might mean the same as a herd of longhorns at a roundup, but to my youthful imagination was more romantic. Hence my occasional fling at the Australian background for a yarn. After all, excitement and high adventure is much the same in any language and any land."

William MacLeod Raine.

Fight Matters

IT SEEMS to us that Wilbur S. Peacock has more than a smatterin' of knowledge about a lot of things. For instance, he is a first-rate story teller, we think, either spoken or written variety. He is a magician, sharpshooter and now—we find—an old glove pusher! But let Peacock tell you about it himself.

"Ah luvs the manly art of self-defense, as Lil Abner would say. Way back when, I was some punkins with a set of gloves, believe it or the Marching Chinese! In fact, quite a few of us were, some landing in the Golden Gloves shebang, ranking pretty high.

"I was tall, with a reach half again as long as most of my opponents, and I windmilled with the best. We had a pro trainer named Harry the Greek, and the town set up a gymnasium for us young hopefuls. Black eyes were like Heidelberg scars, and we nursed them rather proudly.

"Trouble was, I wore glasses, my eyes being way below par. Harry didn't want to let me mix it up too much; but after a lesson or two, he admitted I wasn't too bad, and so I donned my trunks for the grind to the amateur top of the Gloves. Which, incidentally, I never made!

"But enough of that.... Now, I fit into the middleweight class, when soaking wet, and if I never tangle with anybody bigger than a Singer midget, well, that's okay, too.

"But like I said, Ah luvs the manly art. Gimme a typer and a couple of slap-happy maulers and I'll knock the devil out of one or both of them. Claret will flow and welts rise. Ropes will burn and canvas will resound to falling bodies. The best man will win, and the crowd will cheer like crazy. The good guy will get the gal, and the villain will retreat behind his facade of Band-aids (king-size); and like a little god, I shall mastermind everything.

"It's a glorious, vicarious way of kicking people around; I'm all for it. Shucks, I don't even fear Joe; if he makes a move I don't like, I'll give him his come-uppance, just like that ... via my typer, of course!

"Which all adds up to I hope you like the yarn. I enjoyed writing it, and if it gives you a thrill, then my purpose has been achieved. I'll drop around again, soon, I hope. Until then, keep your left up and your right cocked and your chin tucked in. That way, you're safe—maybe!"

W. Scott Peacock.

The Music of the Spheres

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HAS your whole being ever pulsated with a mysterious *exhilarating* rhythm? Have there been days when life suddenly and unexpectedly seemed especially enjoyable—when all of nature and yourself seemed to be swept up in a *silent symphony* of ecstasy? Have you longed to sustain such occasional experiences because of the self-confidence and peace of mind that they instilled within you?

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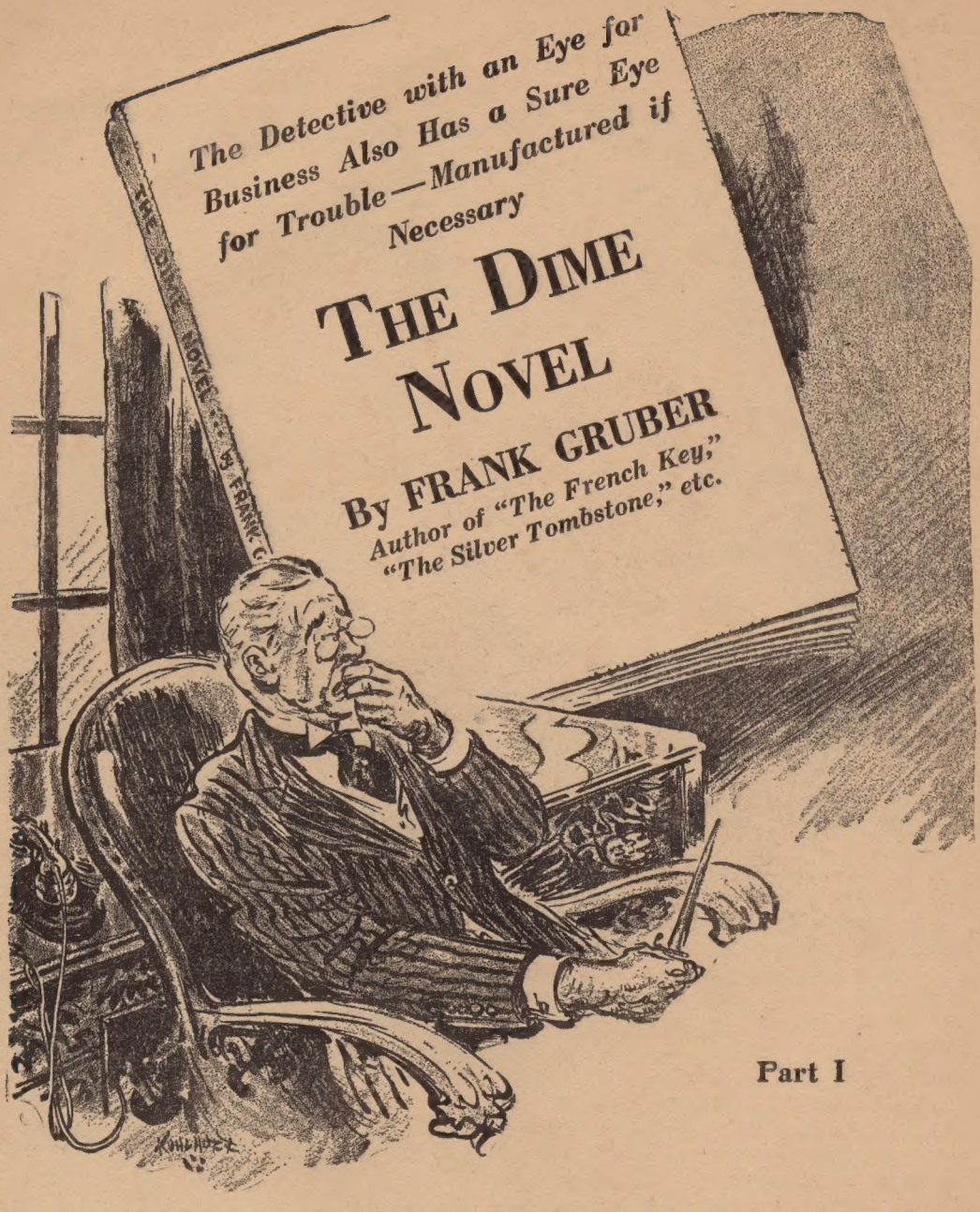

The Detective with an Eye for Business Also Has a Sure Eye for Trouble—Manufactured if Necessary
THE DIME NOVEL
By FRANK GRUBER
Author of "The French Key," "The Silver Tombstone," etc.

Part I

I

OTIS BEAGLE rocked back and forth in his swivel chair, oblivious of the frightful squeak the chair made with every rock. His fat fingers made a pup tent across his well-fed stomach and he was frowning in intense concentration.

On the other side of the double-desk Joe Peel looked up furtively from his last week's *Racing Form*. He didn't like that concentration on the part of Beagle.

The rocking—and the squeaking—stopped. Joe Peel groaned softly. This was it.

Otis Beagle blew on the huge stone in his ring. The ring was just like Beagle. Big, flashy—and phony.

"Joe!" said Otis Beagle. "Do you remember the Jolliffe case?"

"No," replied Peel promptly.

Beagle scowled. "It was only four-five months ago."

"My memory doesn't function on an empty stomach," Peel snapped. "It's lunch time and I haven't even had breakfast."

"You want to watch out for that, Joe," said Beagle. "You keep going without breakfast and after awhile you get so—"

"The reason I haven't had breakfast," Peel said, "is because you haven't paid me my salary for two weeks."

Otis Beagle scowled. "I owe you two weeks' wages?"

"Eighty bucks, pal! And Saturday it'll be a hundred and twenty. If I don't get it, I'll—"

"You'll what?"

"I'll get a second-hand furniture man in here and you'll run your detective agency next week sitting on the floor."

Beagle looked coldly at Joe Peel. "Some day your sense of humor will get the best of you, Joe."

"You think I'm joking? Guess again." You owe two months' office rent; you owe me my wages, but have you missed a meal yourself? Have you missed dropping in every day at that plush club of yours?"

"If it's any satisfaction to you," Beagle said, "the club posted me yesterday. And I have exactly four dollars to my name."

"Four dollars!" cried Peel. "Give!"

"It's all the money I have in the world."

"Give," Peel persisted. "Give, before I forget that you outweigh me seventy pounds."

Beagle glowered at Peel a moment, then drew a flat wallet from his breast pocket and skinned out two dollar bills as neatly as a card shark.

"Why didn't you say you were hungry?"

"Couldn't you hear my stomach growl?"

Beagle grunted and picked up a bunch of three-by-four file cards. "Joe, we're up against it. Clients haven't been coming to the office—so we'll have to go after them."

Peel winced. "How?"

Beagle separated one of the filing cards from the others. He tapped it on the desk. "You remember this Wilbur Jolliffe? He was mixed up in a badger game."

"And we shook him down for a grand."

Beagle cleared his throat noisily. "We settled with the blackmailers."

"We slipped them a hundred and scared hell out of them. The other nine hundred we kept—and then we soaked Wilbur for a five-hundred-dollar fee."

"A cheap settlement. The blackmailers would have taken Wilbur for four times that much." Beagle looked thoughtfully at the card. "Jolliffe's a gay dog."

"Sixty, if he's fifty. And he likes them about twenty—or younger if he can get them." Peel wrinkled his nose in disgust. "A fanny pincher."

"Right. It says on this card that Jolliffe lives on Rodeo Drive. He owns the house—and he has a wife."

"And how! A snowplow in front and a caboose in the rear."

Beagle nodded. "All this happened five months ago. By now Jolliffe is over his scare. In fact, I'd venture to say he is, ah, pinching fannies again."

"His kind doesn't stop until the man pats them in the face with a spade. But I don't get the angle, Otis."

"Hurrumph! I was thinking—we did a good job for Jolliffe once. Why can't we do another for him?"

"But we don't even know if he's in trouble."

"A man like Jolliffe's bound to be in trouble. Why should we wait until he's in so deep that it's almost impossible to get him out of it?"

"There might be something in what you say."

BEAGLE placed the tips of his fingers together and scowled at them. "I think I'll drop around and see him tomorrow."

Peel shrugged. "It can't do any harm."

"In the meantime you might soften him up."

"Eh?"

"Jolliffe may not realize that he's in trouble. But he's got a guilty conscience."

"So have I—and you—and about fifty million other people in this country."

Beagle scowled. "You're being purposely dense. You know very well what I'm getting at. You've got to scare Jolliffe so he'll be in a proper frame of mind when I talk to him tomorrow."

Peel held up a hand, palm toward Beagle. "Now, wait a minute, Otis. We've stretched the rope pretty tight, but you're putting too much pressure on it this time. It'll break."

"Well," said Beagle, "you have two dollars and I have two dollars. What are we going to do when they're gone?"

Joe Peel inhaled and exhaled heavily. "San Quentin, here we come!"

Beagle shuddered. "Don't say that, Joe. Not even in fun."

"All right, I won't say it. But I'll be thinking it. Give me the card."

Beagle handed him the file card and Peel reached for the phone. He looked at the card, then dialed a number.

A smooth voice said in Peel's ear, "Jolliffe and Company."

"Let me talk to Wilbur," Peel said.

"Who's calling?"

"This is a personal call, Sister."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I have no brothers—and I'll have to have your name, before I can put your call through."

"Look," said Peel, "just tell Wilbur that Nat is on the phone."

"Nat who?"

"Just tell him Nat and he'll talk to me so quick you won't even be able to listen in."

There was a pause at the other end of the line and then the girl said, "Just a moment, please."

Thirty seconds went by, then a connection was made and a cracked voice said, "Yes?"

"Yes," Peel replied.

"This is Wilbur Jolliffe," said the owner of that name. "Who—who is this?"

"Nat."

"N-nat, who?"

Peel laughed harshly. "How many Nats do you know? Nats to you." He hung up and met Otis Beagle's accusing glance.

"Crude. Very crude."

"Then why didn't you call him yourself?"

"Because he might remember my voice."

"He might remember mine, too."

"Not as readily. You only talked to him once or twice. Besides, your voice isn't a distinctive one."

Peel scowled at Beagle and got up. He went to an ancient wooden filing cabinet and pulled out a drawer. Beagle watched him with interest. His eyes widened when Peel took out a false beard.

"Who do you think you'll fool with that Dick Tracy outfit?"

"Nobody," said Peel. "That's the point." He put the beard into his coat pocket and got his hat. "In case I get caught and you don't—I smoke Camels," he said and left the office.

He took the stairs to the first floor and left the building. Outside he looked toward Hollywood Boulevard, a half block away, then walked to it and turned eastward.

After a few minutes he consulted the card on Wilbur Jolliffe and after another block entered a twelve-story office building. He rode in the elevator up to the fourth floor.

II

WALKING down a corridor, he found a ground-glass door on which was the legend: "JOLLIFFE & COMPANY." He brought the false beard out of his pocket, slipped it on, then opened the door and entered a fancy reception room over which presided a redhead who was at least gorgeous, if not more.

She looked inquiringly at Peel.

"I'd like to see Mr. Jolliffe," Peel's tone conveyed the impression that he expected Mr. Jolliffe to drop everything to talk to him.

The redhead thought otherwise, however. "May I have your name?"

"Jolliffe," said Peel. "Julius Jolliffe. I'm Wilbur's uncle."

"Quit your kidding," said the girl. "And your beard is slipping."

Peel adjusted it. "Thanks. All right, so Wilbur's *my* uncle. I still want to see him."

"I've a good notion to call a cop."

Peel looked steadily at her. "Get much exercise around here, if you know what I mean?"

"Now, wa-ait a minute—"

"Without the disguise, baby, I'm a tall, handsome fella and I like you, too, but this is business. Cross my heart."

Peel crossed his heart.

The girl shook her head. "I don't get it." But she went to a ground-glass door, opened it and went through. She closed the door carefully behind her.

PEEL leaned over the receptionist's desk and picked up a couple of letters. One was on the letterhead of the Ward Restaurant Supply Company of Toledo, Ohio. It was addressed to Jolliffe & Company, Hollywood, California. From it, Peel gathered that the Ward Restaurant Supply Company thought Jolliffe's & Company's price for 200 Duplicators a little too high. The other letter was written in long hand and was obviously a complaint about a duplicator. Peel didn't get to finish the letter, however, for the door of Mr. Jolliffe's private office opened a couple of inches and a frightened eye peered out.

"Hello," Peel said.

The door went shut, was reopened by the redhead. She came out, closing the door behind her again.

"Mr. Jolliffe will see you in a moment." Then as Peel dropped the letters to her desk, "Are you a cop, or do you just like to snoop?"

"You never can tell," Peel retorted.

The door of Wilbur Jolliffe's office opened and a man with the collar of a topcoat turned up over his ears, came out. He nodded to the redhead, gave Joe Peel a sharp glance and left the office.

"You can go in now," the girl said to Peel.

Peel winked at her and went into Jolliffe's office. Jolliffe was seated behind a big desk. He was a sporty-looking old bird, weazened and pop-eyed, but wearing a tailored gray suit that wouldn't have looked bad on a man thirty years younger.

He was toying nervously with a letter-opener. "Y-you w-wanted to see me?"

"Not especially," said Peel, "but I thought I ought to."

There was a chair a few feet from Jolliffe's desk. Peel seated himself in it, crossed his legs and looked inquiringly at Jolliffe.

Jolliffe looked at Peel. Peel looked at

Jolliffe. The color faded from Jolliffe's face. "W-w-well?"

"Go ahead," said Peel. "I'm listening."

"F-for what?"

"For what you've got to say."

Jolliffe's Adam's-apple raced up and down twice. "About what?"

Peel cleared his throat noisily. "Cut it out. You know very well why I'm here."

Jolliffe's Adam's-apple raced up and back to Paul. "Is it—is it about—W-Wilma?"

PEEL gave no indication that it was or wasn't. Perspiration began to come out on Jolliffe's face. "Look here," he said, making a last attempt to control himself, "if you think you can—"

"Yes?"

A shudder ran through Wilbur Jolliffe's thin frame. He dropped the letter-opener on his desk and pushed back his chair. Joe Peel got up.

"Okay," he said, "if that's the way you feel about it."

He turned, opened the door and stepped out into the anteroom. He closed Jolliffe's door.

"Your name Wilma?" Peel asked the redhead.

The girl's eyes widened. "No." The tip of her tongue flicked out and moistened her lips. Peel shrugged and stepping past her opened the corridor door. He went through, turned and pushed the door open again.

Wilbur Jolliffe was just bursting out of his private office. His eyes threatened to pop from his head as he saw Peel's face again.

Peel laughed raucously and let the door swing shut.

He turned and headed for the stairs. As he descended to the third floor he whisked the false whiskers from his face and stuck them into his pocket.

He walked down the other three flights, left the building and walked to a drug store on the corner of Hollywood and Vine. He got change for one of his two bills and headed for a telephone booth in the rear.

Entering, he dialed the number of the Beagle Detective Agency. The line was busy. He waited two minutes, then tried the number again. Beagle answered this time.

"Beagle Detec—"

Peel cut him off. "Joe. You don't have to wait until tomorrow."

"I know," Beagle replied eagerly. "He just telephoned me."

"Oh, so that's why the line was busy."

"Where are you, Joe?"

"In the Owl on Hollywood and Vine."

"Mmm, I'd better not meet you, just in case somebody followed you. But look—I'm going right over to Jolliffe's. What was it that scared the hell out of him?"

"His guilty conscience—and the phony beard. But he's afraid of a girl named Wilma."

"Why?"

"I don't know. That's all there is. Wilma. But you might take a look at the redhead in his office. Look, but don't touch. I saw her first."

Otis Beagle began to bluster but Peel hung up on him. At the soda fountain he had a chocolate malted milk, which only whetted his appetite, so he followed with a sandwich and a piece of pie. As he ate he considered giving Wilbur Jolliffe another call, but finally concluded that it would be overdoing things a bit.

Leaving the drug store he strolled leisurely to the office and curled up on top of the double desk. In two minutes he was sound asleep.

OTIS BEAGLE found him like that when he came in an hour later. He strode angrily into the office and prodded the small of Joe Peel's back with the end of his thick cane.

"Wake up, Joe!"

Peel opened one eye. "Poke me with that stick again and I'll break it over your fat skull."

"Suppose a client came in," Beagle growled. "How would it look—a detective sleeping?"

Peel got down from the desk. "Spare me the platitudes." He yawned and stretched himself. "Well, are we working?"

"We are. I gave Jolliffe the old razzle-dazzle and—"

Peel thrust out a hand. "Give!"

"Give what?"

"You got a retainer, didn't you?"

"Just a small one. Fifty dollars."

"Two hundred. You always lie in that proportion."

Beagle's fat face got red. "Now, look, Joe. I've had just about enough—"

"So have I. You've got two hundred dollars and I want my share."

"There's office rent and overhead—"

"Pay it out of your share."

Beagle hesitated. "I'll give you seventy-five."

"A hundred or you'll handle Jolliffe yourself."

Beagle brought out four fifties and handed two to Peel. I'll remember this, Joe."

"You do that, Otis." Peel put the bills away. "Now, what about Wilbur?"

"The girl lives at the Lehigh Apartments in Hollywood."

"What's her status at the present time?"

"That's what's worrying Wilbur. He *thought* everything between them was hunky." Beagle grinned. "He's going to call on her tonight and he wants you to follow him."

Peel scowled. "There won't be any need of that. Since everything probably *is* hunky between them."

"Uh-uh; I thought the same thing, but it seems the girl has a brother."

"A big brother?" Peel's enthusiasm, never great, diminished. "Something tells me I'm going to get a punch in the nose."

"That's the risk we take in this business."

"*We* take?"

"You know what I mean."

"I don't, Otis. All I know is that you think up jobs where you get the money and I get a punch in the nose."

THE Lehigh Apartments were three blocks off Hollywood Boulevard, about halfway up a steep hill. The street was a quiet one, containing more homes than apartment houses.

At seven o'clock Joe Peel took up a post under a tree across the street from the entrance.

He smoked four cigarettes before Wilbur Jolliffe climbed out of a taxi a half block down the street. Jolliffe paid the cabman, then came hurrying toward Peel. As he passed he gave him a sharp glance. Joe Peel nodded reassuringly.

"Okay, Mr. Jolliffe!"

Jolliffe winced at the announcement of his name and headed for the entrance of the Lehigh Apartments. Joe Peel lit another cigarette and leaned against a small tree.

III

A CAR with red headlights came grinding up the hill, stopped at the curb in front of Joe Peel. He groaned, flipped away his cigarette and started downhill. But he was too late. A uniformed cop sprang out of the police car.

"Here, you!"

Joe Peel stopped. "What's the trouble?"

"Put up your hands!"

"Now, wait a minute, pal—" Joe began.

The cop whipped out his gun and thrust it at Joe Peel. "Up, I said!"

Joe's hands shot up. Then the second policeman came out of the police car. "Joe Peel!" he exclaimed.

"Rafferty!"

The first policeman lowered his revolver. "Know him?"

Rafferty showed his teeth in a wicked grin. "I'll say I do. Remember the Miles Sackheim case?"

"Can't say I do."

"It was a couple of years ago. Well, Joe here, was mixed up in it."

"Don't let Otis Beagle hear you say that," Joe Peel said.

Rafferty grunted. "That fat four-flusher. Some day I'll catch him—" He brightened again. "Maybe this is it; what're you doing here, Peel?"

"Minding my own business."

"Don't gimme that. We got a call from the station."

"Who turned it in?"

"They didn't say. But the report was you been loitering around here for the last hour."

"Half hour."

"Don't quibble. What're you doing here?"

"I was just going home."

Rafferty caught Peel's arm in a savage grip. "Do you want to spend the night in the bullpen?"

"Try it and see what'll happen to you."

The second policeman put away his revolver and brought out a blackjack. "Okay, Mike?"

Mike Rafferty hesitated, then shook his

head. "No—not this time. He works for Otis Beagle."

"The shamus?"

Rafferty nodded. "Beagle knows a few people. He's crooked as all hell, but we haven't been able to pin it on him. Not for keeps."

"And you never will," Peel said. Under his breath he added, "Until I put the finger on Otis." Aloud, "Pleasant evening, isn't it?"

Rafferty swore. "It was. But you're not going to hang around here; I can assure you of that."

"What would I want to hang around here for?" Joe Peel sniffed. "Go knock off some suckers making left turns." He turned and began walking off.

The two policemen said some things and got back into their car. They made a U-turn and followed Peel in low gear, until he turned the corner at the bottom of the street.

TO BE on the safe side, Joe Peel walked to Cahuenga, three blocks away, then circled back, around blocks, to the Lehigh Apartments. He lost a half-hour and had no way of knowing whether Wilbur Jolliffe was still in the building.

He hesitated outside the apartment house, then finally entered. The gloomy lobby had once been fitted out with a desk for regular hotel service, but the service had been abandoned and the lobby was now vacant and poorly lighted. The light was a little brighter, however, over the battery of mail boxes and Peel went over and read the names.

Some of them had Mr. or Mrs. before the names and those he passed over. Some had complete given names, but none was Wilma. He therefore concentrated on the others and finally narrowed it down to two names:

W. Winters, 306
W. Huston, 504

One or the other of the W's ought to be Wilma. He climbed up the badly carpeted stairs to the third floor and walked down a narrow corridor until he came to No. 306.

He pressed the door buzzer.

"Who is it?" a gruff female voice demanded from inside the apartment.

Peel made no reply. There was a moment of silence, then the voice inside the apartment called again. Peel still made no reply. The door was whipped open in his face and an enormous woman of about forty glowered down at Peel.

"Well?" she demanded.

"Uh, guess I must have the wrong apartment," Joe Peel said. "I'm lookin' for a Miss Smith. Gwendolyn Smith—"

"She ain't here," snapped the amazon and slammed the door in Joe's face.

He whistled softly and climbed the stairs to the fifth floor. He rang the doorbell of apartment 504.

"Who is it?" asked a voice that caused him to brighten. Joe duplicated his strategy from the third floor. He made no reply. A chain rattled inside and the door was opened a couple of inches.

"Yes?"

Peel cleared his throat. "Mr. Jolliffe asked me to call."

A face appeared in the narrow opening; enough of it to make Joe wonder how Wilbur Jolliffe did it. But the face was impassive—a touch on the hostile side. "Who's Mr. Jolliffe?"

Not so good.

"Wilbur Jolliffe. You know—Wilbur."

"Sorry, but I don't know anyone named Wilbur." The door started to go shut, but Joe Peel put his foot in the way.

"Maybe he's giving you a phoney name, sister. It's the old guy I'm talking about. Catch on—"

The pressure of the door eased against Joe's foot. He drew it back and the door was closed. But the chain inside was taken off and the door pulled open again. Joe Peel entered the apartment. He took it in quickly—a room about twelve by fourteen with an in-a-door bed; a bathroom and dressing closet opening off the left and on the right a kitchen. But both the bathroom and the kitchen doors were closed.

The girl was about twenty-five, a fairly tall girl with chestnut hair, a pretty good face and a figure—well, the figure was it. She was wearing a dressing gown, which helped matters a lot.

"Nice place you've got here," Joe Peel said.

The girl closed the door. "All right, I'm listening."

Joe Peel seated himself in an armchair.

"You're Wilma Huston and you've got a—a friend named Wilbur Jolliffe. Shall we go on from there?"

"Let's," said the girl.

"Go ahead."

"*You* go ahead."

"Well, Wilbur's got a wife. You knew that, didn't you?"

"Most men have wives."

"I haven't," said Joe Peel.

"Care to leave your phone number?"

"I might do just that—after we get Wilbur's business straightened out."

"You're his guardian, I presume?"

"In a kind of a way." Joe Peel's eyes focused upon the left shoulder of the girl's dressing gown. It had slipped. Joe's temperature went up two degrees. "What I was going to say, Wilbur's married. And he ain't the divorcing kind. Catch on?"

"Can't say that I do," replied Wilma Huston. She discovered that her dressing gown had slipped and hitched it up. But it didn't stay up.

"The point is," Peel said, "breach of promise suits don't stand up against married men."

"Is that a fact?" There was mockery in Wilma's voice.

Peel frowned. "Yeah, and furthermore, Wilbur's wife knows he's a chaser. She bawls the hell out of him every time some dame snitches on him. But what's a bawling-out worth?"

"You tell me."

"We usually pay fifty bucks. If the dame wants more, Wilbur takes the bawling-out from his wife."

WILMA nodded thoughtfully and seated herself in an armchair across the room. "All cut and dried, eh?"

"Uh-huh."

"Old stuff to you."

"Yep."

Wilma got to her feet. Her lips were pursed up and she nodded thoughtfully. "Mmm. Will you excuse me a minute, while I slip on something?"

She headed for the bathroom door. Joe Peel's eyes clouded, but he decided to play it through. "Go right ahead."

She went into the bathroom, closing the door carefully behind her. Joe Peel got up instantly, strode to the door and put his ear against it. All he could hear was the rattle of clothes hangers.

He went back to his chair, saw a paper-backed book and picked it up. It was a lurid, old-fashioned dime novel, entitled: *Malaeska, The Indian Wife of a White Trapper.*

Pretty strong reading for Wilma Huston. The bathroom door opened and Wilma came out. She was carrying a black dress on a hanger.

"Excuse me," she said and headed for the kitchen. She went into the kitchen and closed the door. Joe Peel looked at the bathroom door. She had left it partly open. He swiveled, looked at the kitchen door.

He got up and went to the bathroom door. He pushed it open a few inches more, stuck in his head. The bathroom and dressing closet were empty. He frowned and went back to his chair.

After a moment he opened the paper-back dime novel and began reading. He read two pages before Wilma came out of the kitchen.

She had the dress on now. It didn't conceal much, but at least the shoulders stayed up.

"Now, about Wilbur," she said, "it's all been very interesting, but I don't know him."

Joe Peel sighed wearily. "I thought we'd covered that."

Wilma looked over her shoulder toward the kitchen. She nodded.

Joe Peel started to turn—and lightning struck him. Actually it was the fist of a very rugged, very angry man, but Joe didn't know that. He didn't know anything—for quite a while.

WHEN he regained consciousness he was up on Mulholland Drive.

There was a throbbing lump behind his right ear. His legs were as weak as milk. The lights of Hollywood, in the valley below, were a shimmering mass. Joe Peel picked himself off the ground, staggered to the edge of the roadbed and stood there for three full minutes until strength flowed into his legs. A quick reach into his trousers pocket told him that robbery had not been the motive for his slugging. His money was intact. He started walking along the pavement. A few cars passed him, but none stopped to give him a lift. The people who

go for drives along Mulholland Drive at night don't pick up hitchhikers.

After fifteen minutes or so he reached Laurel Canyon and cursed roundly. The man who had knocked him out and dumped him up on the mountain had certainly made it tough for him.

It took Peel almost forty-five minutes to reach Hollywood Boulevard and there, at Schwab's Drug Store, he discovered that it was twelve-thirty. He had been knocked out around eight o'clock and had recovered consciousness about eleven-thirty. Three and a half hours.

Peel shook his head and stepped into a taxicab at the curb. Ten minutes later he climbed out before his hotel on Ivar. The little lobby was deserted, save for the clerk and Joe Peel would just as soon have missed him. But the watchdog spotted him.

"Oh, Mr. Peel," he called, "Mr. Hathway left orders for me to ask you about—"

"The rent."

The clerk scowled. "That's right. He said that you were—"

"Skip it, chum. I'm not in the mood. Here—" Peel reached into his pocket and brought out a fifty. "Apply this on account —and give me a receipt for it. The last time I trusted a night-clerk he went south with the money and I had to pay it all over again."

"I beg your pardon!" said the clerk huffily. He wrote out a receipt. Peel stuffed it in his pocket and climbed the stairs to the second floor.

He unlocked a room that was all of ten by twelve feet in size and contained a bed, a chest of drawers, one chair and a maple table that was supposed to be a desk. It was home.

Peel stripped down to his shorts and climbed into bed. Two minutes later he was sound asleep.

IV

THE good California sun was shining into Joe Peel's room when he awakened. He guessed that it was after eight by his watch in the pawnshop on Western Avenue. He yawned, then winced. He had forgotten the lump behind his ear.

He climbed out of bed and went into the tiny bathroom. The lump was down somewhat but was now discolored. Joe Peel scowled. Somebody was going to pay for that.

He dressed and was about to leave the room when he discovered that his right coat pocket contained something bulky. He reached in and brought out the old dime novel he had picked up in Wilma Huston's apartment. He had been reading it while Wilma dressed and when she had reentered the room he had automatically stuck it into his pocket.

HE LOOKED at the booklet a moment, then shrugged and tossed it on the desk. Turning, he left the room.

On the corner of Hollywood Boulevard he went into a Thrifty Drug Store and had a breakfast of orange juice, hot cakes and coffee. After that he lit a cigarette and strolled leisurely to the office of the Beagle Detective Agency. It was a quarter after nine and Otis himself never got in much before eleven.

He rode up to the second floor in the elevator, walked around a corridor and saw someone standing in front of the office door. Joe Peel blinked. A customer; and *what* a customer!

She was in her early twenties, fairly tall and wearing a gray suit that could have been a Hattie Carnegie model but wasn't. She had hair the color of a young corn silk, a complexion that matched and the best-looking nose Joe Peel had ever seen. He whistled under his breath as he walked up to the door and reached up to the transom for the key.

" 'Morning," he said, casually. "Waiting for me?"

"Are you Mr. Beagle?"

"Joe Peel is the name," Peel replied smoothly. "Beagle's a figurehead. I run the shop."

He unlocked the door and stepped aside politely for the girl to enter. That was the impression she made on him.

She went into the office and Peel pulled out his own swivel chair for her to sit down. He went around to Beagle's chair.

"Something I can do for you, Miss—Miss—?"

"Huston." The girl hesitated briefly. "Wilma Huston."

Joe Peel looked at her steadily. This was

not the girl he had talked to in Wilma Huston's apartment the night before. Definitely not.

"I'm glad to know you, Miss Huston," he said. "Is there something I can do for you in the detecting line? This *is* a detective agency, you know."

"Of course, that's why I'm here." A tiny frown marred the smoothness of her forehead. "It's—well, I don't know if this kind of work comes within your field, but—" She exhaled suddenly. "The fact is, a man is bothering me and I want you to stop him."

"Mmm," said Peel, "a very interesting case. Can you tell me just how this man is annoying you—? I mean, does he whistle at you?"

"This is no joking matter, Mr. Peel," the girl said. "The man is married and I don't want to be named as the correspondent in a divorce case."

"You've got something there, Miss Huston."

"I want it made clear that I do not only *not* want his attention; but he is to leave me entirely alone. No letters, no flowers, no presents. And no telephone calls."

"No nothing?"

"Right. Now, how much will this cost me?"

"The case doesn't seem like a very difficult one, Miss Huston; shall we say, uh, fifty—" Peel took another look at Miss Huston. "Call it twenty-five."

The girl opened her purse, took out a wallet and skimmed out a twenty and a five. "Will you give me a receipt, please?"

Joe Peel hesitated, then pulled out the center drawer of Otis Beagle's desk and brought forth a pad of receipt blanks. He wrote: "Received of Miss Wilma Huston, Twenty-five dollars—"

Miss Huston said: "Put down, 'for professional services rendered'."

Peel wrote what she directed. Then he signed his name to the receipt and handed it to Wilma Huston. She put it in her purse and got to her feet.

"Wait a minute," Joe Peel exclaimed. "You haven't told me yet the name of the man who's bothering you?"

"That's right, I forgot. Well, it's Wilbur Jolliffe. He has an office in the Claymore Building, down on Hollywood Boulevard. Wilbur Jolliffe and Company."

Joe Peel had expected that. He looked dourly at the alligator-skin bag in which now reposed the receipt he had given Wilma Huston.

He said, "All right, Miss Huston, now if you will give me your address and phone number?"

"That won't be necessary, will it? That's all I want you to do—make the man stop bothering me. I'll know if he lets me alone, won't I?" She smiled brightly. "And if he does bother me again, I'll be right down here."

"Of course," Peel said, unhappily. "But

it's a rule of the office that clients leave their addresses."

"Well, *you're* really the agency, aren't you?" Wilma gave Peel the business with her eyes. "You can make or break a rule, can't you?"

"Yes," said Joe Peel.

"Then—?" She left it unfinished and walked out.

Joe Peel stared at the closing door. There was a queer sensation in his stomach. He had felt that sensation at other times—just before something happened to him.

HE GOT up from Otis' chair and went around to his own. The faint odor of Chanel No. 5 wafted into his nostrils. Wilma Huston. The first Wilma had been all right—until he'd met the second one. Fried rabbit is all right, too, until you taste fried chicken.

The door of the office opened and Lieutenant Becker entered. He had been on the force only four years and was already a lieutenant. That was the sort of cop he was. With him was Sergeant Fedderson.

"Good morning, Mr. Peel," the lieutenant said, cheerfully. "Has Otis been in yet?"

"Little early for him, Lieutenant." He

looked sourly at Sergeant Fedderson. "Hello, Mike."

The lieutenant went around to Otis Beagle's chair and seated himself. Fedderson walked to the files and leaned against them.

"You don't mind if we wait for Mr. Beagle, do you?" Lieutenant Becker asked.

"Not at all. Although I can't imagine why you'd want to see Otis."

"Oh, there's a little problem connected with a case I'm working on," said the lieutenant. "Thought I'd stop in and ask Otis' opinion. Clever man, you know."

"Otis?"

"Don't you find him so?"

Sergeant Fedderson pulled out one of the file drawers and began toying with the contents. "Keep your fingers out of there, Mike!" Joe Peel snapped.

Fedderson pushed the drawer shut and gave Joe Peel a dirty look. The latter turned back to the lieutenant. "What did you say, Lieutenant?"

"I was just asking how business was?"

"Slow. We ain't had a case in a week or more."

"Oh, no? I thought you were working on something for a man named Jolliffe."

AT THAT moment Joe Peel would have sworn that a mouse was running around in his stomach. He looked at the lieutenant and moistened his lips.

"I only work here," he said.

"But you do the dirty work."

Sergeant Fedderson was pulling out a file drawer again. Joe Peel saw him, but did not remonstrate this time. He was too busy thinking. About San Quentin and things like that.

He said, "Who, me?"

"Uh-huh. Been reading the want ads lately?"

"Should I be?"

"You never can tell. When you're working for a man like Otis Beagle."

Joe Peel drew a deep breath. "Otis is the smart one here, Lieutenant. Give it to me in one-syllable words."

Becker looked down at his fingernails; his tongue was in his cheek. "We've got Otis." He paused just a moment, then added, "At last."

Joe Peel watched Sergeant Fedderson as he browsed through the file drawer.

Lieutenant Becker said, "Otis has been skating around the thin ice for years. You know that. Well, the ice has broken—and I've got him."

"Where?" asked Peel.

At that moment the door opened and Otis Beagle came into the office. His suit was nicely pressed; he was freshly shaved and reeked of cologne. The glass on his fingers and in his necktie sparkled brighter than ever.

"Ah, good morning," he said, jovially. "Lieutenant Becker, to what do I owe this honor?" He waggled a fat forefinger at Sergeant Fedderson, at the file. "Naughty-naughty!"

Joe Peel tried to catch Otis' eye, but his big employer refused to look at him. He was all attention for Lieutenant Becker.

"Hello, Otis," Becker said lazily. "Been waitin' for you."

"Have you now?"

"Thought you might like to take a little ride down to the station house."

"I can't this morning, Lieutenant. Awfully busy on an important case."

"Indeed? Peel said you haven't had a case in more than a week."

"That's what I told him," Peel blurted out, "but he says he heard we were working for a man named—"

"Never mind, Joe!" Becker warned.

"—for a man named Jolliffe," Peel finished.

Beagle went to the coat rack and hung up his thick cane. He followed with his Homburg, then turned to Lieutenant Becker.

"I don't have to tell *you,* Lieutenant," he said, "that a licensed private detective cannot be forced to talk about his clients any more than a doctor can be made to tell about his patients."

Sergeant Fedderson closed the file drawer. There was an eager look in his eye.

Becker got up from Beagle's swivel chair. "Let's talk about professional ethics down at the station, shall we, Otis?"

"I'm not going with you," Beagle said, getting hard.

"*Now,* Lieutenant?" exclaimed Sergeant Fedderson.

Becker shook his head. "I'm not joking, Beagle. You're coming with me."

"If you have a warrant for my arrest."

"I can get one."

"On what charge?"

"On a charge preferred by Mrs. Wilbur Jolliffe."

Beagle brushed past Becker and seated himself at the desk. He reached for the phone and began dialing a number.

"*Mrs.* Jolliffe, you say?" he said to Becker.

Becker nodded. Then Beagle's call went through. "Hello — let me talk to Doug Devol."

Lieutenant Becker's eyes began to glow. Sergeant Fedderson's face twisted into a scowl. They knew who Doug Devol was.

"Pinky?" Beagle boomed into the telephone. "Otis. Hope I didn't wake you up. Oh, I've been up an hour or more. I didn't drink as much as you did last night. . . . Hangover, eh? Well, too bad. . . . Look, Pinky, what I called you about . . . a couple of flatfeet are bothering me . . . poking their noses into my business. One of them, a Lieutenant Becker, even had the gall to talk about getting a warrant for my arrest . . . What's that? Call you the moment he shows up with a warrant? Swell, Pink, old man . . . no, don't do it, now . . . he's been fairly civil. Okay, Pinky, I'll see you at the club later. . . ." He hung up and turned to Becker. "Now, what was that about Mrs. Jolliffe?"

Lieutenant Becker's face had turned pink down to his collar line. "Wilbur Jolliffe committed suicide last night. I've just come from his house." He brought a folded sheet of paper from his pocket. "He wrote this before he shot himself."

He thrust the note at Beagle. Beagle took it and began to read. Across the desk, Joe Peel whistled tunelessly.

The note made a tremendous impression on Otis Beagle. A fine film of perspiration came out on his fat face. He finished reading and without a word skimmed the note across the desk to Joe Peel. Peel read:

> To Whom It May Concern:
>
> I am taking the easy way out, because I do not know which way to turn. To spare my dear wife, Mildred, I will not go into details. It is sufficient to say that my troubles are due entirely to the machinations of a scoundrelly private detective, one Otis Beagle, to whom I wish only the worst of everything.
>
> Wilbur Jolliffe

Peel refolded the letter and skidded it back across the desk. There was more than one mouse in his stomach now. In fact, it felt like a couple of teams of them were playing hockey.

Lieutenant Becker picked up the note. "This was in the typewriter on his desk," he said. "Do you think you'll talk now?"

V

BEAGLE said, "Are you sure it was suicide?

"There was a bullet in his head, his head was on the typewriter and the gun was on the floor, under his hand. What would *you* call it?"

"Who found the body?"

"The maid—this morning. He'd been dead since about one o'clock."

Beagle scowled. "Jolliffe was married. Wasn't his wife home?"

"Yes, but she's hard of hearing. She claims she didn't hear the shot." Becker hesitated. "They had separate bedrooms." He made an impatient gesture. "Now, let's have your explanation."

"About what?"

"Stop beating about the bush, Beagle," Lieutenant Becker exclaimed. "That letter was in Jolliffe's typewriter. It was the last thing he did before shooting himself."

"The letter is typed," Beagle retorted. "And it isn't signed."

"Hurray for our side," Joe Peel exclaimed.

"I expected that," Becker said, bitterly. "But you were doing something to Jolliffe."

"Who says so?"

"His secretary. I talked to her before I came here. She said you were with Jolliffe for an hour yesterday."

Beagle thought that over and decided not to say anything. Becker went on angrily, "You've a reputation for shaking down people, Beagle."

"That's libel, Lieutenant," Beagle snapped. "I run a private detective agency and my reputation is as good as yours. Better."

Becker's face was getting pale from suppressed anger. "What was your business with Wilbur Jolliffe?"

"I don't have to tell you."

"You'll tell, Beagle. You'll tell even if

Pinky Devol *is* your pal. I promise you that."

Becker strode to the door, whipped it open, then turned and gestured to Sergeant Fedderson. "Come on, Mike!"

Fedderson followed his superior out. The moment the door closed Otis Beagle put his forefinger to his lips, then tiptoed to the door.

He waited a moment, then pulled it open suddenly. The corridor outside was empty. He let the door swing shut.

When he turned to Peel he was trembling. "Joe!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "We're in it—deep!"

"*You* are, Otis," Joe Peel said, "I'm only your employee—remember?"

"Yes, yes. I'm responsible for your actions. I know that. I'm in a jam. Pinky can only help me so much. That damn letter of Jolliffe's——"

"You said it was a forgery."

"Maybe it is." Beagle's face twisted. "What happened last night?"

"Not much."

"Then why'd Jolliffe cash in his checks?"

"Search me."

"Stop it, Joe. I'm in big trouble and I've got to clear myself. Let's go over everything very carefully. You saw Jolliffe last night, didn't you?"

PEEL nodded. "I went over to the Lehigh Apartments at seven o'clock. I stood outside for about a half hour, then Jolliffe came up in a taxi."

"Why a taxi? He's got two cars."

"Maybe he didn't like to park his car around there. Someone might remember the license number."

"Yeah, I can see that. All right—go ahead."

"He got out of the taxi a half block from the building, then walked right past me."

"Did he talk to you?"

"No—I talked to him."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing important. Just hello, or okay or something like that. He didn't reply, just went into the apartment house. And then——" Peel drew a deep breath. "Then the cops came."

"No!"

"A patrol car. Some skittery old maid turned in a call that a suspicious character was loitering around. The cops grabbed me before I could disappear."

"Oh, no, Joe!"

"Oh, yes, Otis! Not only that but one of them knew me. A flatfoot named Rafferty."

"He'll tie you up to me."

"He knew I worked for you. On the strength of that he didn't take me down to the station. But he shagged me away and I spent a half-hour walking around corners losing him. When I got back to the apartment house——"

"You went back?"

"Naturally. Better sit down, Otis. You ain't gonna be able to take all this standing."

"There's worse?"

Peel nodded and Beagle dropped into his chair. "I went into the Lehigh Apartments."

Beagle groaned. "Why?"

"Well, how was I to know if Jolliffe was still there?"

"What difference did it make?"

"What kind of a dick do you think I am?"

"I sometimes wonder."

"Do you want to hear this or not?" Beagle signaled him to go on. "Her name is Wilma Huston and she lives in Apartment 504. I went up and—" Beagle shrank a little more. "I rang the doorbell—"

"And Jolliffe answered!"

"No, he didn't. In fact, I don't think he was even in the apartment." Peel frowned suddenly. "Although he might have been.

I'll have to describe the apartment for you. There's a main room with an in-a-door bed, a sofa and a couple of chairs. On the left of it is a door leading to a dressing closet and bathroom. The kitchen is on the right. There's a glass door with a curtain over it at the far end. I imagine the kitchen is a long narrow one running the entire width of the apartment. I didn't get to look into it, but I judge that from the layout."

"Why didn't you look into the kitchen?"

"I'll get to that. A girl answered the door. I assumed it was Wilma Huston."

"Naturally."

"Naturally nothing. Hear me through. This dame is about twenty-five with plenty of S-E-X. She had on a dressing gown."

"Was the bed down?"

"You've certainly got a nasty mind, Otis."

Beagle didn't even blush. Peel went on. "Like I say, I assumed she was Wilma Huston and told her a few facts."

"You're about as subtle as an elephant, Joe," Beagle snapped.

Peel folded his hands together and leaned back in his chair. "If you're going to keep interrupting——"

Beagle gestured impatiently. "Go ahead, give it all to me."

"I told her Jolliffe was married. Which she knew, of course. Made her believe that this was old stuff for Jolliffe and that we usually settle for fifty bucks. The idea was to let her know it wasn't worthwhile running to old lady Jolliffe about it. She took it pretty good, I thought, until I finished. Then suddenly she said she didn't know any Wilbur Jolliffe—"

"He might have been giving her the John Smith stuff."

"I know. That didn't bother me. I forgot to say that in between our sparring, she suddenly said she wanted to put on a dress and popped into the bathroom. She went in and got a dress, then crossed to the kitchen to put it on."

"Why?"

"That's where I slipped. While she was in the kitchen I peeked into the bathroom. There wasn't anybody inside. Then she came out of the kitchen, with her dress on. Get that, she had her dress on."

"That's why she went out into the kitchen."

"Yeah, but I haven't told you yet what came out of the kitchen—after her."

"Her brother!" Otis Beagle exclaimed. "I told you about him."

"So you did. But that ain't all. When I woke up—"

"He hit you?"

"Either he hit me or lightning struck me. I was out for three and a half hours. And then I woke up on Mulholland Drive."

"What then?"

"I went home and went to bed," Joe Peel snapped.

Beagle shook his head. "I don't like it, Joe. I don't like it at all. You acted like an amateur."

"You want to hear some more?"

"What more is there to tell? You got slugged and you went home."

"Yeah, but this morning."

Beagle looked startled. "You didn't go back there?"

"No. I came right down to the office and you know who was waiting outside the door? Six guesses. Wilma Huston."

"Well, go on," Beagle cried. "What're you keeping me in suspense for?"

"I can hardly stand it myself," Peel said, sarcastically. "I'll give it to you short and quick. Miss Huston wanted to hire the Beagle Agency to shoo away a man who's been molesting her. Yeah, you guessed it. Wilbur Jolliffe." Peel held up his hand before Beagle could interrupt. "And what's more I took the case and gave her a receipt for twenty-five bucks."

"You couldn't, Joe, you couldn't! You can't do that—take both sides in a case. It's against the law."

"Something being against the law never bothered you before. Now, grab hold of your chair and get the socker. The Wilma Huston who came into this office and hired us is—*not* the Wilma Huston of the Lehigh Apartments!"

FOR a moment Otis Beagle stared at Joe Peel. Then suddenly he kicked back his swivel chair and leaped to his feet. "A trap, Joe!"

"Maybe. I don't think so." Peel wrinkled up his forehead. "I was watching Becker pretty closely. You had him going and I don't think he could have held it back, if he'd known anything about this girl. Although, I admit I didn't like the receipt business."

"Why the devil did you give it to her?"

"She asked." Joe Peel coughed. "And you didn't see her. The first Wilma Huston wasn't bad, but the second one——" Peel whistled.

"Damn you and your women."

"There's no use getting sore, Otis. Like you said, you're in trouble. You're going to have one sweet time getting out of it. So

don't waste your energy squawking at me. Face the situation and see what you can figure out."

"I'm thinking now. These two girls—they could be living together. Lots of girls share apartments."

"I'm thinking along those lines myself. There was only one name on the mailbox, though. That's why I assumed the girl who answered the door was Wilma. She *could* be living with Wilma, though. Except for the dress—"

"Eh?"

"She went into the kitchen to put it on. The big guy was in there all the time." He paused. "He's supposed to be Wilma's brother."

"He still could be."

"All right, if you want to think things like that. So he's Wilma's brother. And the other girl's, uh, boy-friend. Now, what about Wilma herself—I mean the girl who came here this morning?"

Beagle exclaimed, "She could be the girl-friend. It could have been Wilma you saw last night and this girl her friend, *pretending* to be Wilma."

"That could be. But now we come to the prize question—why did this girl come here to *you?*" He held up an index finger. "Remember, Jolliffe hired you to get this girl off his neck. He wouldn't be apt to tell her he had hired a detective named Otis Beagle, would he?"

Beagle frowned. "Of course, things weren't just that clear-cut. Uh, you will recall that Jolliffe didn't *come* to us."

"I almost forgot that. You might as well tell me how you persuaded him."

"It was your work — mostly. He was scared stiff. I dropped the name of Wilma and he almost fainted. It was his conscience. He thought he and Wilma were getting along swell, then your stuff—and my mention of Wilma's name—well, what would *you* think?"

Peel nodded. "Just what was I supposed to do last night? You told me to go up to the Lehigh Apartments and wait outside, but that's all you told me."

"Wilbur didn't know himself. The brother-stuff stuck in his craw. Maybe he thought there'd be rough stuff and he could yell for you. I don't know. He just said he'd like to have a man handy."

"He was upstairs less than a half-hour. Unless, he was in the kitchen with the big guy."

"We may never know that." Beagle sighed, then drew in a sharp breath. "You've got to go out to Jolliffe's house, Joe."

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"My mother didn't raise any crazy kids."

"Can't be helped. I'm no good at that kind of stuff. You've got to get into the house—look things over and talk to Mrs. Jolliffe. You can't convince me that Jolliffe would kill himself because of this Wilma business. He's had that kind of trouble all his life and he never killed himself before. Maybe—" a wistwill expression came to Beagle's face "—maybe, it wasn't suicide at all."

"A typed letter?" Peel shrugged. "I don't buy that either. But—going out there to Jolliffe's house——"

"Please—"

Peel looked at his big employer; in all the years he had worked for Beagle he had never seen humility in him. Or such fear. The fear may have accounted for the humility.

He got up. "If I wind up in the clink, Otis, I'll hate you for the rest of your life."

"If you get in trouble, I'll get you out. Remember. Pinky Devol. And I've got other friends, too."

VI

WILBUR JOLLIFFE'S house was on Rodeo Drive, between Sunset and Santa Monica. It was a two-story, French Provincial, probably worth $50,000. A Ford coupé was standing at the curb in front of the house when Joe Peel strolled up from Sunset Boulevard. He walked on to Santa Monica, had a malted milk in a drug store, then went back up Rodeo Drive. The Ford was gone.

Peel walked up to the door and rang the bell. A colored maid came up to the screen door.

"I'd like to see Mrs. Jolliffe," Peel said.

"She ain't in no condition to see anybody," the maid replied. "We've had big trouble here. . . ."

"I know—that's why I'm here." Joe hesitated then drew a piece of tin from his

trousers pocket. He gave the colored girl a flash of it. Her eyes widened.

"Oh, a detective!"

"Will you tell Mrs. Jolliffe I must see her?"

The maid opened the door and led Peel into a large living room. Then she left the room. Peel heard her feet padding up the carpeted stairs to the upper floor.

He took a quick look about the living room, saw a closed paneled door at the rear and went to it. He turned the knob and pushed the door open a foot. He looked into the room and saw that it was paneled and lined with book-shelves. Jolliffe's den.

Yes—there was an Underwood typewriter on a desk at the far end.

Peel turned and faced Mrs. Jolliffe just entering the living room.

"My maid tells me you're a detective," Mrs. Jolliffe began. "There've been a half-dozen detectives here already."

"I'm a special investigator," Peel said smoothly. He sized up Mrs. Jolliffe and did not blame Wilbur too much—for his quest of younger and more attractive female companionship.

Mrs. Jolliffe was 55 and looked every year of it. She was about five feet four inches tall and had, as Joe had put it vulgarly to Beagle the day before, a snowplow in front and a caboose in back. She weighed around 180.

As if that wasn't enough, Mrs. Jolliffe had a superiority complex. She looked at Peel as if he was something the cat had dragged into the house; pedigreed Persian cat, for Mrs. Jolliffe would certainly not have permitted an ordinary cat in *her* house.

"My husband committed suicide," she said coldly. "That's all there is to it. The morticians are taking care of everything and I don't see what you——"

"Orders, madam," said Peel.

"I'd like to examine your husband's bedroom."

"It's upstairs."

"Naturally, but I'd like your permission to go up."

"I don't see how I can prevent you," Mrs. Jolliffe replied. There was a petulant, whining note in her voice.

Peel bowed stiffly and leaving the living room climbed the carpeted stairs to the second floor. A quick glance about in the upper hall, told him that there were four bedrooms. The doors of two stood open. One was the master bedroom, a largely femininely furnished room. Peel passed that up and went to the other room. It was about half the size of the first furnished with Spartan simplicity. Peel walked through it, looked into a bathroom, then came back into the bedroom. There were no personal articles of any sort in the room. He went to a clothes closet, saw a dozen suits, a half-dozen pairs of shoes. Only clothing.

Peel came out of the room and encountered Mrs. Jolliffe puffing up to the head of the stairs.

"You were in your room, Mrs. Jolliffe when—when it—"

"When he shot himself? Of course. I was sound asleep. As I told the other policeman, I didn't hear the shot. My husband," Mrs. Jolliffe's tone became severe, "was not a man of exemplary habits. Very little culture. He was involved with a hussy a few years ago and since that time we had very little to do with each other."

Peel's sympathy for the dead Wilbur went up. "I see," he said, aloud. "And would you, ah, say he was involved with another, uh, hussy, now? I mean, do you think that is the reason he——"

"I suspect it," snapped Mrs. Jolliffe. "I warned him the last time that if it happened again I would cut off his allowance. . . ."

"His allowance, Mrs. Jolliffe? I understand Mr. Jolliffe was a businessman."

"Oh, *that!*" Mrs. Jolliffe made no attempt to conceal her contempt. "He toyed with a business now and then. It was an excuse to get out of the house."

Peel nodded thoughtfully. "I see. Now, would you mind if I looked over his—his study, downstairs?"

"Go ahead. I must lie down awhile."

Peel went downstairs and into Wilbur Jolliffe's library. He closed the door.

The room was a small one, not more than twelve by fourteen feet in size. There was a spot on the rug behind the desk that was still wet, but otherwise there was no indication that a tragedy had taken place here recently.

Peel pulled out the top drawer of the desk, then gave a sudden start as his eyes lit on the bookshelves beside the desk. He stepped around and strode to the shelves. The top two contained clothbound volumes,

all quite old, but the bottom three shelves held paper-bound books, all thin and all very old. Dime novels. Hundreds of them.

Joe Peel pulled one out. It had a lurid cover and was entitled: *Deadwood Dick's Big Deal.*

"I'll be damned!" he said, aloud.

Chimes bonged somewhere in the house. Startled, Peel folded the dime novel and thrust it into his hip pocket. Then he started for the door.

He could see the hall from the door and just as he looked out, he saw the colored maid passing to answer the doorbell. Peel hesitated, looked back at the bookshelves, then stepped into the living room.

A harsh voice in the hall said, "I want to see Mrs. Jolliffe."

Joe Peel grimaced. He walked out of the living room, into the reception hall. Sergeant Fedderson gawked at him. "Joe Peel, by all that's—"

"Hello, Mike," said Peel. "Sorry, I can't stay and have a saucer of tea with you."

Fedderson grabbed Peel's arm. "What're you doing here?"

"Let go of my arm."

"I've a good notion to drag you down to the station house."

"Lieutenant Becker had a notion like that."

Fedderson let go of Peel's arm. "We're going to have you two birds down there yet."

"Save a room with a southern exposure," Peel said, sarcastically and brushed past the sergeant.

HE DID not breathe easier, however, until he was a block from the Jolliffe house. Then he walked swiftly toward Santa Monica Boulevard where he caught a vacant taxi at a traffic light.

Fifteen minutes later he entered the building which contained the offices of Jolliffe and Company. He half expected the door to be locked, but found it open and inside, the red-headed receptionist opening mail.

"Your boss is dead," Peel said, "or haven't you heard?"

"I've heard," retorted the redhead. "But no one's fired me or told me to stop working."

"Didn't Lieutenant Becker tell you?"

"Lieutenant Becker didn't hire me."

"Still, you'll be looking for a new job soon. I might be able to throw something your way."

"What, outside of some passes?"

"I never make passes at redheads when I'm working."

"You looked better yesterday with the whiskers."

Peel grinned. "Oh, you remember me."

"The manner, not the face. What was the idea?"

"I was just playing a joke on Wilbur."

"A joke? He was scared stiff after you left."

"Wilbur scared easily. I guess he had a guilty conscience."

"You'll have one, too—after the police get you."

Peel frowned. "Why should the police want to get me?"

"You figure it out. You came in here wearing a phony beard. Result, Wilbur got so scared that he shot himself last night."

"Hey," said Peel. "Don't go thinking like that. As a matter of fact, I'm a detective. And I was working for Wilbur, believe it or not."

"Not," said the girl.

"Now, look, baby," said Peel, seating himself on the desk. "I'm not a bad guy and I've got a weakness for redheads."

"But *I* like big men."

"I'm big enough," Peel retorted.

"Not for me."

Peel sighed. "Let's start all over. My name is Joe Peel." He looked inquiringly at the girl. "Give."

"Not that it'll do you any good, but my name is Mary Lou Tanner."

"A very pretty name, too. You shouldn't ought to be so afraid to tell people. Uh, you might as well give me the phone number."

"Only one man has my phone number," said Mary Lou Tanner. "He's a captain in the Marines."

"Swell, I've got a girl who's a lieutenant in the Waves. So we can both forget the romance-stuff and stick to business. Which reminds me, what kind of a business did Wilbur Jolliffe have? It has something to do with duplicators, I gathered from looking at the mail on this desk yesterday. But what's a duplicator?"

Mary Lou pulled out a desk drawer and brought forth an instrument about four by seven inches in size. The bottom of it was

shaped like a rocker and had a mimeographing stencil tightly bound over it.

"This," she said. "It's a small mimeographing maching. Mostly used for postcards. Mr. Jolliffe sold it—by mail."

"Oh, a mail-order business."

"That's right. He ran ads in a number of newspapers and magazines. Secretaries of lodges and clubs, small businessmen bought these mimeographers."

"What does it sell for

"Nine ninety-five."

Peel pursed up his lips. "The advertising must cost quite a lot. I wouldn't think there'd be such a great profit in it."

"There wasn't. The machine costs three ninety-five wholesale and it costs from five to six dollars to sell."

PEEL did some rapid mental arithmetic. "And to that his office, and, uh, overhead and he didn't——"

"He didn't. He lost money every month."

Peel nodded. "I see what his wife meant."

"You've talked to her?"

"Yes. Do you know her?"

"She came in here only once in the three months I've worked here. I never got such a dirty look from anyone in all my life."

"By the way," said Peel, "how did *you* get along with Wilbur?"

"Pretty good—for the last couple months. The first month my fingernails were worn down to the quick and I lost four pounds, from dodging around desks. Then I reached an understanding with Mr. Jolliffe—and not what you think, either! My boy-friend was home on a furlough and I had him in here one day. You remember I told you I liked big men. Well, Wilbur never bothered me after he saw the captain."

Peel nodded thoughtfully, then said casually, "By the way, who is Wilma?"

The question put casually, made no unusual impression on Mary Lou. "She's one of Wilbur's girl friends; was one, I should say."

"What does she look like?"

"Never saw her; she was just a voice on the telephone."

"How were they getting along? I mean, had she started shaking him down?"

Mary Lou regarded Peel coldly. "I must say, you don't have a very high opinion of women."

"Not young girls who go out with old married men like Wilbur Jolliffe."

Mary Lou would undoubtedly have made a retort to that, but just then the door opened and a heavy-set man of fifty entered.

"How do you do," he said, "I'm George Byram." Then, as the name did not seem to register on Mary Lou, he added, "Mr. Jolliffe's brother-in-law."

Peel looked at the newcomer with interest. There was little family resemblance between Byram and Mrs. Jolliffe.

"Oh, yes," said Mary Lou.

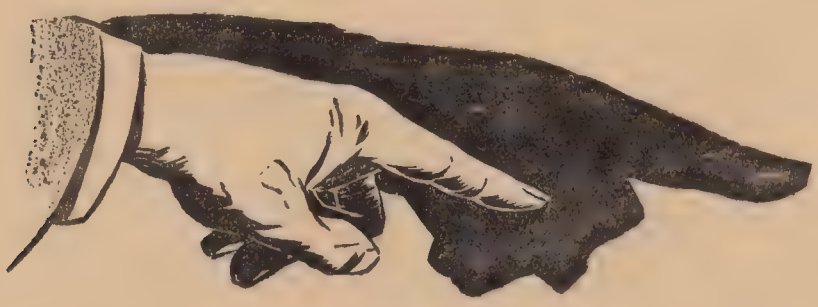
"I'm taking over this place," Byram went on. "My sister asked me to." He looked at Joe Peel. "Anything I can do for you?"

"Not unless you'd be interested in buying a subscription to *True Confessions?*"

Byram snorted his answer and Peel pulled open the door. He gave Mary Lou a wink and went out.

So Mrs. Jolliffe had a brother, a robust younger brother.

(Part II in the next SHORT STORIES*)*

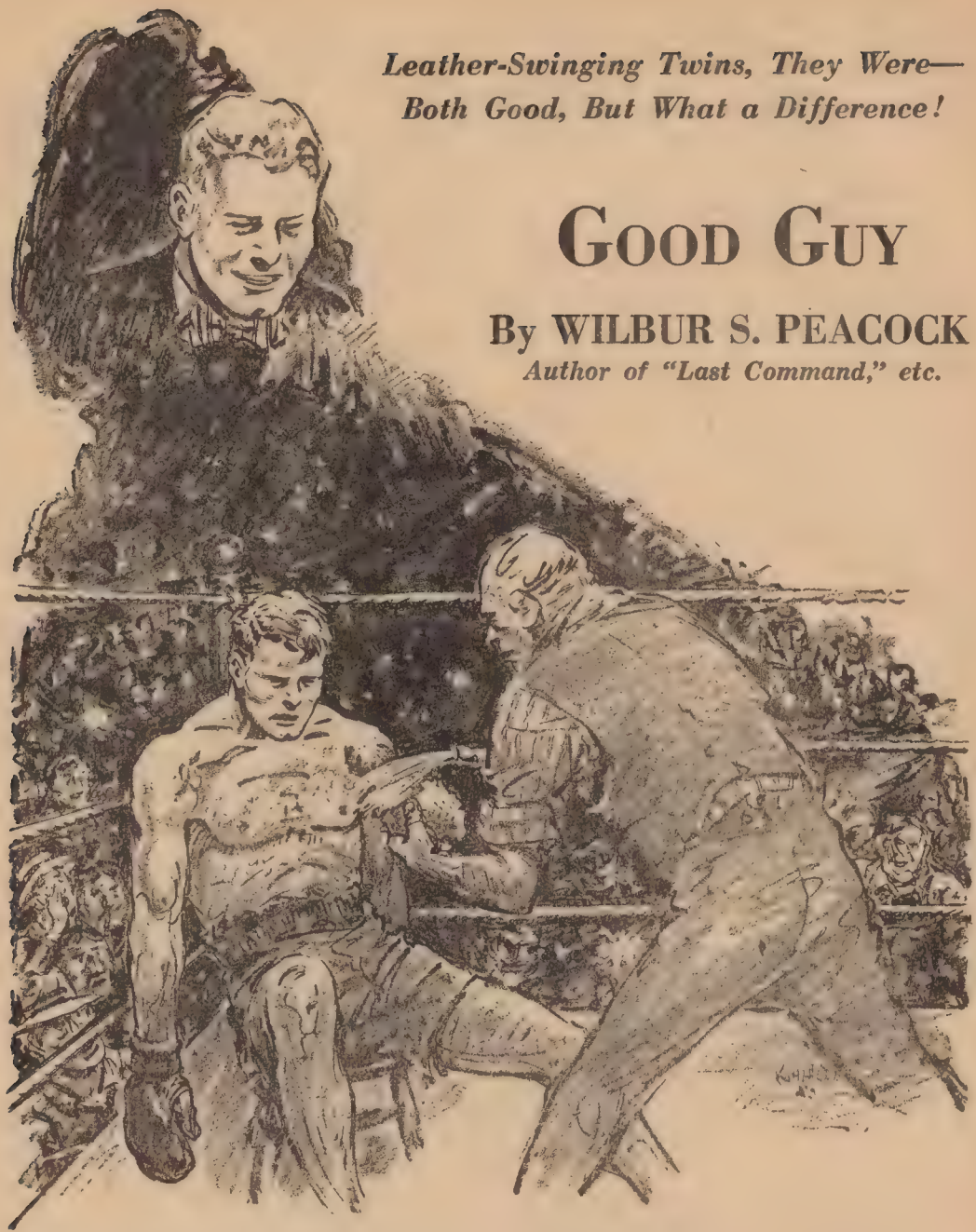


Leather-Swinging Twins, They Were—
Both Good, But What a Difference!

GOOD GUY

By WILBUR S. PEACOCK

Author of "Last Command," etc.



"IT'S his head," Hymie said, "It's swelled like a balloon. I hope Drake knocks his teeth down his throat."

Barry Kincaid grinned from where he lay on the rubbing table, feeling the rubber's hands kneading the long muscles of his legs. Sweat was dark in the yellow of his hair, and he was using the pillow-gloves for a head rest.

"Don's okay," he said. "Forget it."

Hymie rolled the cigar stub from one corner of his wide mouth to the other. Worry lay like a curtain over his eyes, and his tone was a lie to how he felt. He leaned against the wall, his shapeless suit sagging even more.

"So help me," he declared, "I'll sell the bum's contract. Two hundred fish it cost to square the beef with the guy he hit last

night, and that ain't the first time it's happened. Look, kid, I want you should talk to him and make him see what's right."

"I said forget it. Look, he's got a right to have some fun."

Hymie wrung his hands, his eyes misting with self-pity. "Fun!" he said to the rubber. "Now he's gotta have fun, and me with ulcers from worry. Does he think shots at the championship grow on trees!"

Barry sat then, swinging long legs over the table edge and dropping his robe. The sun had burned his skin so dark his hair was bright gold by contrast. He flexed his arms, and a ripple of strength ran over his shoulders. He looked eighteen, and was twenty-four, eight minutes older than Don.

"I'll talk to him," he said, and went toward the showers.

He let the hot water run over his body, watching the steam piling up in the stall, and felt good. He could see the manager's fat figure through the doorway, and sympathy touched him, mixed with laughter. Hymie was like a hen clucking over a couple of chicks, worried by everything, yet incapable of doing much more than clucking dire warnings.

FIVE years now they had been together, Don and Hymie and himself, and sometimes it was hard to remember any other life. It was difficult to recall the Home and the other kids; they were like bits of an intruding memory, nagging with their familiarity, but meaning nothing.

"I'll lay my cards on the table," Hymie had said that night at the AC gym, after the amateur fights. "I ain't never handled no champ, but some of my boys were plenty good. Maybe I can make one of you a champ; anyway, it's worth the gamble. So here's my proposition; I'll pay living expenses for one year, while you kids smarten up; after that, it's a straight percentage deal."

"We'll think it over, Pop," Don had said.

"Okay," Hymie said, "I'll be around about a week."

That was five years ago, when they were nineteen and the Home was a year in the past. Boxing was a quick way of picking up a few bucks, and the garage work kept them in good shape. Barry had done the leg work, and then sold the idea to Don.

"His reputation's good, Don," he argued, "and that means a lot. Let's sign up."

Don turned from where he knotted his tie at the mirror and grinned at his twin. "Okay," he agreed, "if you say so. But right now I got something more important to do. Loan me ten bucks; I'm flat."

"Ten bucks!" Barry said, frowning. "Listen, you got thirty for the fight tonight, and don't think I don't know it."

"I owe it. Come on, be a good guy."

AND now, with the water slashing needle-points at his back, Barry wondered just what being a good guy entailed. They'd started even, right from the start, but, somehow, Don was always ahead on everything. In school, in athletics, even in girls, Don had had the best of everything, for with his laughing voice and his cocky arrogance, no one denied him anything.

He had run, while Barry had plodded, and "be a good guy" had been his rallying cry when living had slipped him a right cross he couldn't handle. Maybe that was why, now, Hymie was working up a sweat by worrying and Don was absent from the training gym four hours before the fight.

Barry cut the shower and reached for the rough towel. He dried his solid body with quick heavy strokes of the thick cloth, and then tossed it aside into the hamper. The floor felt cool and rough beneath his feet as he went to his clothes locker.

"I just called Ruth," Hymie said, "and she says the last time she saw him he was heading for the *Red Mill* with a couple of dames." He swore luridly about the butt of his cigar. "Damn it, kid, I'm worried!"

"Yeah!" Barry said, and began to dress.

It wasn't easy, this waiting; he had done it before when Don had hit the bottle. But the other times weren't as important as this. Then, the fights had been against second-raters, build-ups, and Don had so far outclassed the men he faced, he could have whipped them without training a lick.

But Drake was good, too good, the first step on that last ladder toward the championship; he was the gate that had to be slapped open if a man wanted a crack at the really big time.

Don could take him; no one doubted that. But even so, Drake was no pushover, and the fight might go the limit. The thing was

a sellout, for Don was good copy, what with his easy laughter and his escapades. And now the kid had pulled another runout and wouldn't reappear until just a few minutes before the match.

Barry knotted his tie and reached for his coat. "I'll take a run out to the joint," he said, and slid his arms into the sleeves.

"I'll go along," Hymie offered.

Barry shook his head. "You stick around, just in case I miss him," he said. "Anyway, he listens to me."

"Well, get him back. If he's had a couple, he may be too tight to fight. Damn it, why couldn't he have the sense you've got!"

Barry almost laughed. He couldn't imagine Don as being anybody other than himself.

They were identical, so much so that even Hymie couldn't tell them apart until they talked. But in their minds they were utterly alien. Don laughed his way through life, not giving a damn about the next day, living only from thrill to thrill. While Barry had a dream he nursed, one with an automatic lift and four gas pumps and a swell mechanic's shop in back. That dream lay in the future, though, five thousand dollars away. That was their difference, that and the way they felt about Ruth.

She was little, like a half-grown girl, and her eyes laughed, and her face was that of an Irish colleen with upturned nose. She walked with quick lithe steps, and her voice had the breathless eagerness that stirred Barry's heart with everything she said.

Maybe, he told himself time and again, that was why he loved her, maybe it was because she was like Don in a way, excited with being alive and arousing his protective instinct.

Not that she needed protection. She had a temper and a wit that drove her thoughts in slashing words. She hadn't used either on Barry, but Don and she had hit it up hot and heavy a couple of times when he had got out of line.

She was as good as engaged to Don, or so it seemed to Barry, for always they were together, her job as Hymie's secretary taking her with them from town to town. Not that Don seemed to have the thought, for he went with other women, too. Probably that was why Barry had kept silent about how he felt. Anyway, now it didn't matter, for if his plans went right, he'd be pulling out within six months, and his future would be one where hands weren't fists but animate tools with which to ply his chosen trade.

Hymie was watching him, and he flushed, for sometimes he had the thought the baldish fat manager could read his mind. He picked his hat from the rack and held it loosely in his hand.

"Stop worrying," he said to Hymie.

"Oh, sure!" Hymie said, and threw the frayed cigar butt into the corner. "With a five-grand forfeit if Don doesn't show, plus a blacklist from the Syndicate, you tell me not to worry."

"I'll bring him back," Barry said shortly, and left the room.

HE WENT through the gym, smelling the mingled odors, smoke and liniment and sweat and leather, and he wondered what it would be like, after five years of this, to give it up. And, too, it would be strange to be alone, for Don would move up, taking the championship eventually, and then the patterns of their lives would be utterly different. He shrugged away the thought and went down the stairs to the street.

The car was a neat little job, hired by the week by Hymie, and Barry fumbled for the keys, selecting one for the door. A shadow moved over the sunlit paint, and he knew the girl was Ruth, even before he looked up.

"Hi, Barry," she said. "Going out for Don?"

"I thought I'd ride out that way," Barry said, and felt the flush riding his tanned cheeks. She alone could do that to him; not that he was embarrassed; it was just that, well, it happened.

"I'll go along."

"Huh uh! I can do it better alone."

But already she was opening the door, and he was helpless to stop her, just as he was when Don made a decision. "Hurry," she said, and he went about the car and slid into the seat.

He started the car and slipped it into the traffic, driving with casual skill. Ruth sighed, looking from the window, and he flicked his gaze her way, strangely content.

She was wearing green, a neat little suit that accented her youthful curves; and when she looked around, her eyes were greener than usual, shadowed with her thoughts.

"You think he's all right?" she asked, and he nodded.

"He's okay," he said. "This is the first time he's pulled a whizzer in a long while." He frowned, watching the street.

"Oh," she said, and lit a cigarette at the dashboard lighter.

Barry felt the first shiver of anger then, and it shocked him, for it was deep and driving and bitter to his heart. He stole a glance at the girl, seeing the clean line of her profile, and the longing within him had depth and solidity.

"You love him, don't you?" he asked, knowing what her answer would be.

Ruth nodded imperceptibly. "I don't know," she said. "He's big and thrilling and somehow dangerous. He won't let me think when we're together, and—" Her voice trailed away.

"Yeah, I know," Barry said harshly.

He swung the car into Marshal Street. A muscle ticked in his jaw, and he wondered what she would say if he told her of his love. Probably she'd nod, maybe even dismiss him and his words. She wouldn't consciously hurt him, though, of that he was sure.

"Why do you do it?" she said then, breaking his thought. "Why don't you let him grow up?"

"What's that?" he said, not fully understanding.

"I said, why don't you let Don grow up? You front for him, and you nurse him, and he punches you around like a heavy bag. Why play second fiddle all the time?"

His wide shoulders lumped with anger then, anger at her, and then at himself, for he knew she spoke the truth.

"You're crazy," he said.

"Not me," Ruth said, and flipped the cigarette away. "Three years now I've seen you get him out of one scrape after another. Why?"

"Well," Barry fought for words. "After all, he's just a kid!"

"Kid!" Ruth's eyes watched Barry's face. "What are you—Methuselah? You're eight minutes older, and you try to act like his father. You make me mad."

"Forget it."

"Sure, just forget it. Go ahead, be brother's keeper, play the martyr, and the thanks you'll get you can put in your eye."

Almost did he stop the car. Never could he remember his anger flaming so hotly. She could do this to him, and the knowledge was frightening. He was in love with her, and she could make him want to tiptilt and spank her.

"You don't understand," he said thickly. "You don't understand."

"Maybe I don't." She was angry now, unreasonably so, and her tone was tight with tears. "So he's going to be champion of the world; so you're going to let him be that! Now isn't that just too noble of you. You who can outbox and outfight him the best day he ever lived!"

"That's a lie!" He snapped the words, and his face was white beneath its tan.

"Oh, shut up!"

"Look," he said, "somebody's got to care for him, else he'll get in a jam."

"I said, shut up." She was crying, and sight of the tears thrust panic into his mind.

"Please!" he begged.

"I hate you!" she said then, and dabbed at her eyes with a wisp of handkerchief.

"Me!" The utter unreasonableness of her attitude floored him. "Look, what have I done? Anyway, you've got to understand; after all, we both love Don."

A red light caught him, and he toed the brake. The car was still in motion, when Ruth slipped from the seat and slammed the door.

"*I'm* not your brother," she said through the window, and then she was gone, walking proudly and defiantly, not looking back.

Barry kicked the car ahead, swearing softly to himself. *Women,* he thought, and then looked for excuses for her arguments. And somehow the answers he found were not satisfying as once they had been and were bitter to his mind.

"Hell!" he said, and swung the car into the parking lot beside the *Red Mill.*

ONLY a few cars were there and no attendants. He tooled the sedan into a parking slot, and then stepped out and walked toward the garish building which sprawled in pseudo-Dutch style at the side of the lot.

The smell of beer and smoke pushed at him through the doorway, and he went ahead, blinking against the semi-darkness, pausing for a minute beside the bar.

He saw Don then, sitting at a side booth,

and walked that way, feeling the unfamiliar anger touching his senses again.

"Hi, Don," he said, and leaned against the booth side, watching the girls.

Don was drunk, stupidly drunk, and his neck was weirdly limp as he lifted his head to peer at Barry. His gaze wandered and then focused, and he licked his lips.

"Go 'way," he said. "Go 'way and let me be."

"Hey look, hey look!" the blonde said. "I'm drunk! I can see two of Donsy boy!"

"Shut up," Don said without anger, and tried to straighten. He didn't make it, and Barry's hand caught at his shoulder, steadying him.

"Let's go," Barry said then, and disgust was something new in his mind. "Come on, let's get out of here."

"Siddown, siddown, goodlooking," the brunette said, and caught at his arm. "Golly, just imagine two big guys like this just alike."

BARRY'S mouth tightened. "We're leaving, Don," he said. "Look, the fight's only three hours away."

He could feel his ears burning, and he knew the other customers watched. This could be ugly, and that he didn't want.

"Forget it," Don said and groped for his glass. "I'll put him away in the first." He smiled owlishly. "Maybe you ain't heard; I'm the coming champ."

"Yeah, I heard, Donsy boy," the blonde said, and swung to Barry. "Beat it," she finished, " 'fore I have Donsy boy slug you."

Barry bent then, and strength levered in his back. His brother was completely out of the booth before he realized what Barry intended doing; and then it was too late, for he was being propelled toward the doorway.

"Hey look," he said fuzzily. He was almost dead weight.

"Take it out of this," Barry said to the bartender and tossed a ten on the bar; and then he was urging Don into the open.

He got his brother to the car before Don passed out. For once, Don had overestimated his capacity, and now he leaned against the door, mouth slack, the air ruffling his blond hair.

"You crazy fool," Barry whispered bleakly, and started the motor. He tooled the car from the lot and into the street, and then fed gas, as his mind tried to figure out a time schedule.

Three hours at the most, he told himself. Three hours, and knew instinctively they would never make it. Three hours to undo what Don had done, to sober him and clear his head and try to leave him enough timing to hit Drake and put him away. It was impossible; this time Don had gone too far.

Later, at a Turkish bath, the attendant said the same. "Whew!" he whistled, "This guy really has a load. I ain't guaranteeing anything."

"Do the best you can," Barry said.

"Sure, sure," the attendant said, and began to undress Don. His gaze went from brother to brother. "Which one are you?" he finished.

"I'm Don," Barry said, "and I want him in my corner tonight."

"I'll try," the attendant said, and leaned forward confidently. "I've got ten bucks riding on you tonight; how safe is it?"

"Safe enough," Barry answered shortly. "Come on, hurry!"

And even as he said it, he knew the futility of the task. Don had walked into a blind alley; his head rolled as though he were dead. And two hours later, when he could sit, but had the shakes, Don shook his head at his twin.

"I can't make it," he said, "Hymie will have to claim I'm sick."

It was then that Barry saw Don really for the first time. It was a composite picture made of scenes and words and memories. It started when they were kids and progressed into the present. It held laughs and heartbreaks and a few ugly moments. It was even more terrible, because it was as though he looked into a mirror and saw himself.

"Well," Don said, and rubbed a shaking hand over his sweat-beaded face, "are you going to be a good guy?"

"Yeah!" Barry said. "Yeah, I'm going to cover up for you. Now, stay here until I get back."

He turned then, knowing what had to be done.

* * * * *

THE shock of ammonia fumes ran up into Barry's head, crowding, pushing back the darkness. He choked and wheezed and his gloved hand thrust the bottle away. He could see his second's face floating like a

balloon before him, and close at hand, Hymie's voice pleaded for attention.

"What round?" Barry mumbled, not caring, the words like a reflex.

"Sixth coming up," the second said, and massaged the tired muscles of Barry's neck.

"Damn it, Don," Hymie said, "get the lead out of your fanny; he's making a monkey out of you!"

"You fight him," Barry said dully.

He blinked, focusing bleary eyes. Drake was there, squat and deadly, nodding his head at his manager's words. He didn't look tired; he looked as though the sweat had barely begun to boil in him. The lights painted shadows on the muscles over his ribs, and he tapped his gloves together, stretching, taking it easy.

Barry's mouth hurt. It wasn't cut, but it hurt like hell, and he licked his lips with a papery tongue. This guy was tough, tougher than anybody he had ever met. Don could have handled him, could have laid him like a rug; but Don was at the bath, sweating out a five-hour victory jag that had backfired.

Barry shook his head, and the second pulled out the elastic of his trunks, letting his ribbed belly muscles flex in easier breathing. He sighed, the air rushing like cold water into his lungs, threatening to drown him.

"His left, his left," Hymie was saying, "you know better than to let him use that left on you."

"I'll get him," Barry said, and knew he lied.

This was different now than it had seemed at first. The whole thing had seemed so simple, even a bit noble, for him to take Don's place. He could fight, almost as well as Don; and the crowd had paid to see two men beat each other's brains out. And if Don didn't show, well, he looked like his brother, and who would ever know the difference.

But now, sitting on the stool, and feeling the shock in his punched body, he knew he had bitten off more then he could chew; this bite was going to strangle him to death.

He heard the five-second buzzer, and the second's hand slipped the mouthpiece into place. He clamped his lips, watching Drake.

He could hear the crowd, and the sound was like the whining of dogs waiting to be fed. He hated it then, hated the formless yelling faces which watched with avid eyes for the bloodletting. They didn't care who won; they just wanted to see some guy sprawled, twitching, on the canvas.

He heard the bell and came up automatically. He was moving, going fast, finding a reserve of strength. Drake flicked a left into his face, before he could cover, and the pain ran down his neck again and clamped about his heart.

He countered, hooking, and then threw his right, and then danced back before Drake could open up. It was hard to fight this way, dancing and weaving and bobbing, like a puppet on a set of strings. But this was Don's style, and he had no choice. Let anyone realize that Don wasn't in the ring, and there would be hell to pay.

Drake came after him, slow and sure on his feet, his face an emotionless mask of grisly flesh, eyes watching like those of a cobra ready to strike. He came close, infighting, and Barry took what he had to give, wincing at the shock of leather mits blasting holes in his belly. He danced back, straightening Drake, holding him away.

I can't win, he thought, *I can't win.*

A right hand caught him high on the cheek and spun him back into the ropes. He turtled, covering his head, while trying to break free of the following Drake, and in that second he saw Ruth sitting at ringside. She wasn't yelling; she was just sitting and watching, the program crumpled in her hands.

THEN he was away from the ropes and carrying the fight. He used both hands, wickedly, punishingly, and Drake couldn't break the barrage. He went backward before Barry, covering, taking most of the blows with the stolidity of a mule being lashed with a whip.

The crowd woke up again, yelling, screaming. *Kill him,* was the thought, and the thought fitted either man.

Drake fell into a clinch, the sweat running from his face onto Barry's shoulder, and the sound of his breathing was the rushing of wind through a forest.

Then the referee's hands came in, pushing, straining, and they broke, going backward a step. Barry's arms were like strips of soft lead, without strength to lift, malleable and useless.

Drake stepped in again, using the left, the sweated leather flicking like a snake's head, driving, driving, and each snapping blow drove Barry back.

He ducked and weaved, trying to get away, and the fist followed him with an uncanny prescience. It found his face and upset his balance, and always, cocked and hair-triggered, Drake's right poised, waiting for the right second to flash into deadly action.

Barry brushed the left aside, throwing his own left, and then trying a hook that didn't connect. He saw the red streak flame on Drake's face where the glove had skidded, and then a triphammer slugged at his belly, and he was going down, the canvas scraping at his buttocks.

Surprise more than hurt rode his mind, and the crowd's delighted roar was like a wave breaking over his head. "Two," he heard the referee say, and then he was turning, coming back to his feet, feeling the dull paralysis in the pit of his stomach flaming agonizingly.

He hit Drake, barely waiting for the referee to clean his gloves, hit him with both hands, forgetting his role for a moment and fighting his own style. Drake's face grew white with shock, and he went backward fast, the ropes bulging where his back pushed at their cloth covers. He covered, as Barry came in, and then came out, riding the spring of the ropes, and drove Barry before him.

The red haze left Barry's eyes and his mind took control again, and he straightened, fighting his brother's style. He was pecking away, doing no damage, when the bell sounded.

He hit the stool and felt the shaking of his legs. The second took his mouthpiece, and then a sponge in Hymie's hand mopped cool water at his face, the drops falling icily on his sweating belly.

"That's better," Hymie said. His face was red, and the fringe of hair about his pate was awry from being fingered. He chewed the end of a cigar which had never been lit, and his eyes were alive and concerned.

Drake was talking, arguing with his manager, and the sight touched Barry's mind with laughter. The guy was getting a bit of what he had handed out in the first five rounds; now he was taking instead of giving.

"Watch that left, and keep moving," Hymie said. "Remember, you're no infighter, and anyway, that Drake is hard as hell. If he gets lucky, he'll put you away."

Barry wasn't listening; his eyes had slid toward Ruth, and he could see the white oval of her face at ringside. He shivered, wondering what her thoughts were.

"You feel okay?" Hymie asked, kneading the muscles of his arm.

"Yeah!" Barry said, and wondered how long it would be before the masquerade fizzled out.

THEN the minute was gone, the five-second buzzer sounding, and he was waiting for the bell. The fetid air layered over his head, the smoky waves rocking above the ring. He could see the far board with its clock, and he wondered if he could take the next four rounds.

The bell sounded, and he went out slowly and cautiously, wanting only to weather the storm. He couldn't whip the man, he knew; but if he could hold the decision to a draw, then a return bout, with Don actually fighting, would be a natural thing, and the crowd would never know it had been gypped on the first fight.

He circled Drake, keeping out of his way, and the boos began to hammer from where the crowd watched. It wanted excitement and brutality, and the sixth round had whetted its appetite for what it hoped was coming.

Ride him out, Barry thought, *that's my only chance.*

He wished then that he was Don, if only for the next twenty minutes. Don would have made a monkey out of Drake, cutting him down, blowing his head off with rocking rights. But he wasn't Don, and the thought was somehow frightening.

Drake came in, and he couldn't think for a moment. Drake was hell on wheels and canny with the years of fighting lying behind him. He was clean, though, and that was good, for Barry knew what an experienced man could do by fighting dirty.

He rushed Barry, forcing the fight again and Barry went back, pedaling desperately to keep the man away. Drake's game was infighting, and Barry, as Don, could not mix it up that way.

He took a hook from Drake, and a second, and blinked away the curtain crawling

over his eyes. He saw the left stabbing out, and tried to roll his head. And Drake pulled the trigger on his right.

It was not square; that was the only thing that saved Barry. It hit him high, lifting a mouse instantly below his left eye, and then went on by, slashing at his ear. But it was bad enough, and soot floated in Barry's mind, and he didn't see the left snaking up. Three more blows he took, before he hit the canvas.

He lay there, smelling the resin, wanting only to lie there and let the count toll on. "Three," he heard, and then, "Four."

His gloved hands slipped, and his muscles were watery, and he wondered if ever he could push his way from the floor. Faintly, he heard Hymie's voice bellowing from the corner, and the ring floor vibrated, and he realized Drake was dancing eagerly in a neutral corner.

"Seven," the referee's voice said, and his sleeved arm swung before Barry's face.

Then he was coming up, slowly, fighting inertia, gravity holding him prone. He gathered his legs and surged with his hands, and the crowd screamed like beasts robbed of their crippled prey.

He tied up Drake, coming up, tied and held, and when the referee broke them, he went back into the clinch. The crowd booed, and Drake grunted, trying to break free and finish the job.

Then Drake was out of his arms, and the blows were coming in. He couldn't match them, and he didn't try, riding his bicycle again, running away, wondering if he ever would breathe normally again. The bell caught Drake in a final rush; and then they were back at their corners, Drake grinning and confident now, and Barry walking like a sailor, legs widespread for balance.

Hymie didn't talk this period. His fat hands were gentle as they massaged life back into Barry's shoulder; and there was in his attitude the feeling of his disapproval. He had built Don from nothing, built him cunningly, and Barry knew by his face that he felt betrayed.

He was ashamed of Don then, more ashamed than he thought he ever could be. Things had always come too easy for Don, never had he had to fight for anything, really fight, that is. His superb skill had done what Barry could never do, even with training, and he had taken that for granted, letting others take the dirty end of every deal.

HE LOOKED then at Hymie and knew this thing was wrong. It had seemed fine at first, the thing to do. The customers hadn't really counted; they were paying to see a fight, and that was what he meant to give them. But they and Hymie thought he was Don, the fight was a fraud, and that was not right.

He started to speak, and it was then he saw Ruth again. She was crying, and he knew why. Never had anybody stopped Don, and she thought he was the man she loved, and it was hurting her terribly. He knew then that his impersonation wasn't over.

He breathed deeply, then, hoarding his strength, and when the bell sounded, he came out lithely, not as swiftly as at first, but with a steady movement that no man could have stopped.

He took Drake's measure in that round, took it and stored it in his mind, and began his own fight. He wasn't Barry then, nor was he Don; he was a combination of both, dancing in and out, and infighting with slashing short blows which drove all color from Drake's face.

It wasn't easy, and sickness crowded at him when Drake opened up with his big guns. He was the target, and Drake had the range most of the time. But he kept coming in, taking what he had to take, and cutting the man down an inch at a time.

The round was a year long, a century long, and there were times when he wondered if he would last. His spurt of speed disappeared, and he was plodding. Drake had knocked the life from him the first half of the bout, and he couldn't find that hidden reserve which every chump must have.

He fought the only way he could, riding with the blows, and throwing leather at every opening. The crowd was screaming shrilly, and Hymie had swallowed the butt of his cigar; and still he mixed it up, trying to put Drake away.

Both were dead on their feet at the end of the round, and both eyed each other incredulously during the rest period. Drake had cornered a tiger, and the animal was tearing him to pieces. Six rounds had been his, and

now this blond with the swollen eye was setting him up for a knockout.

"He's all yours," Hymie yelled. "Take him, Don, knock him out of the ring."

The second grinned and mopped with the sponge, and his confidence was back where it had been at first. And Barry leaned against the corner ropes, incredulity touching his mind.

I can do it, he thought, *I can whip Drake. And if I can whip Drake, then that means I could go to the top.*

The thought frightened him. It was alien to his mind, for always Don had been the coming champ. And then thoughts trickled back, and he was remembering how he had fought Don, carrying him, not consciously, but carrying him while they were training.

It would be simple. Put Drake away, and then announce his identity. There'd be trouble, of course, but Hymie was clever and would be able to straighten things out. He'd be the white-haired boy then; he'd get a bit of the things he deserved for playing second fiddle most of his life.

And then he thought of Don, and knew the idea would never be carried out. Ruth had been right; he could outfight his brother; but that still didn't mean much. Don, in six months, would be the top fighter in the world, and that was the life for him. He'd make a good champion, once he settled down, for he had color and flash and the cockiness which a champion should have.

He went into the ring, thinking that, and Drake was not as anxious as he had been before. He took Drake's left twice, going in, and then sank his right glove as though planting it in Drake's belly.

The man bent, and Barry could see his pink scalp through the short-cropped hair. He was gasping for wind, and Barry straightened him with a left, and then threw his right. Drake went back, bouncing off the ropes, going to his knees, pawing blindly for support.

This was it, this was the payoff. When Drake got up, he would go down again for the last time. The records would show that Don Kincaid had scored a knockout in the ninth round of a scheduled ten-round fight. And the door to the top five men would be open for him.

Barry hit the neutral corner and watched the referee count. At "Five," Drake came up. He was game and tough and incredibly rugged, but he was whipped, and Barry could read it in his eyes.

HE CAME in, ready to take what was coming, and Barry cocked the power of his right hand. He held it back, flicking his left like the tip of a whip, stingingly, goadingly, setting Drake up for the kill. A smear of blood seeped from one nostril, and his mouth was lumpy at the left corner. But there was no fear in his eyes, and he came driving in.

"Now!" Barry whispered, and threw the right.

He couldn't miss; Drake wasn't moving. He was taking what was coming, not because he wanted to, but because there was no stopping Barry then. They were giants, blond and brunette, one tall and the other more squat. They were gladiators far removed from a Roman amphitheater, but just as bloody and brutal while the mob cried its bloodlust, thumbs down, asking for the kill.

So Barry threw the blow, and then pulled it at the last minute. He rocked Drake, and stopped forever any rally the man might try to make, but he didn't put him away.

He carried the man the final minutes of the ninth and tenth rounds. He did it deliberately, knowing he was throwing away a future, and somehow it made no difference. And when the referee held up both their hands and called the fight a draw, he was satisfied.

He went from the ring, waving automatically to the crowd, and told Hymie to keep everybody out of the dressing room. He showered and dressed, ignoring Hymie and the second, not even taking time for a rubdown, and then slipped out of a back entrance and caught a cab.

Don was sober, when he reached the Turkish bath. He was sober, and defiant; and Barry stood for a long moment, watching him.

"What happened?" Don asked. "Where'd you get that eye?"

"You gave it to me," Barry said then.

"Me!"

"Yeah, you. I went on in your place tonight, and Drake handed it to me, thinking I was you. So figuring it right, you gave it to me."

Don shook his head, licking dry lips.

"Look, kid," he said, "I'm sorry for what happened. How bad did he lick you?"

Barry Kincaid laughed then, and the sound rolled harshly about the room. "He didn't lick me, Don," he said. "I carried him. I could have put him away any time in the last two rounds, but I figured I'd leave that job to you. You see, I went on as you, and I guess maybe you had better do your own licking."

"You're nuts!" Don said incredulously. "Drake would give even me a tough fight."

"Yeah, I know!" Barry wasn't smiling now. "But what you don't understand is that I can whip you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!"

They stared at each other then, and slow respect came into Don's eyes. He flushed and touched his collar as though to loosen it, and then he nodded.

"I've known that for a long time," he said. His tone strengthened. "Okay, so I'm a heel, but I still fight my own fights in the ring." He balled capable fists. "I'll tell Hymie what you've done."

BARRY felt the shakes coming to him again, as they had when Drake was punching him like a training bag. He wiped his mouth, and the pain of his swelled eye was like that of a toothache.

"You'll talk to nobody," he said. "The customers got their money's worth, and Hymie can't stand to lose the five thousand forfeit. And—" Coldness touched his spine. "Ruth thinks you fought the fight, and you nor nobody else is going to hurt her."

"Listen—" Don Kincaid began.

Barry hit him then, throwing his right hand like a rocket, twisting his fist into the blow. He caught Don beneath the left eye, lifting a mouse instantly and dropping the man against the wall. Don grunted, and slid slowly to the floor.

"We're twins again," Barry said. "That marks you the same as me. Now you can go back, and if you keep your mouth shut, you can be champ. Me, I'm leaving."

Don rubbed his face, the anger fading from his eyes. "Leaving! Where?"

"Back to the place I've picked out for the filling station. I've played patsy to you long enough, and I'm fed up with the smell of gyms. You're on your own now, fellow."

"I'm sorry, Barry," Don said, and came to his feet. "Look, believe me, I'm sorry."

"Forget it." Barry smiled then, for the first time. "Look, be a good champ, will you?"

He turned then, not wanting any more, and went from the building into the street. He heard Don calling and gave no heed, and when he sat in the taxi, he leaned back wondering how old a man had to be before he lost the urge to cry.

At the hotel, he went in a side door and climbed the stairs to the second-floor room. He jammed clothing into the suitcases, strapping them tightly. The knock came on the door before he was through; and when he didn't answer, the knob turned and Ruth came in.

"Hello," she said and saw the bags. "Going someplace."

He turned his head so that she would not see the bruised eye, and his tone was cold and even.

"Don doesn't need me any longer," he said. "I'm going back to open that filling station."

She leaned against the door, and he wished he could face her squarely to see what lay in her eyes.

"I just talked to Don," she said, "and congratulated him on the fight."

"Yeah!" Barry went into the bathroom for his shaving equipment. "Well, you'd better beat it, Ruth," he finished. "He's probably waiting for you."

"Why?"

"Why!" Barry could see his face in the mirror, and his mouth was strained. "Because he's in love with you."

"Oh!"

"So long." Somehow, the bathroom was a refuge.

He heard the bed creak. "I'm not going," Ruth said.

"Look—"

"You look. Do you think I'm blind; do you really think I didn't know you were in that ring tonight?"

"Don told you."

"Yes, but I already knew it. He also told me what you told him."

He couldn't speak now. His hands were on the basin, and he could feel the wicked thudding of his heart.

"Still being noble!" Ruth said, and her

voice broke. "Damn you, damn you, damn you!"

He was at her side then, and she was small and fragile in his arms, and he held her tightly, not wanting to let her go.

"Look," he said, "look, I love you; I guess you know that."

She sighed a bit, settling in his arms. "What about Don?" she asked.

"To hell with Don!"

"Good!" Don Kincaid said from the doorway.

He was smiling, and the mouse under his eye was turning a beautiful shade of purple.

"Listen—" Barry began.

But Don had already shut the door, and the sound of his whistling faded down the hallway. Barry looked from the door to Ruth and saw that she was smiling.

"Be a good guy," she said happily, "and give me a kiss."

He laughed then, the melody of his thoughts tangling in his mind, and when he bent to her, she was waiting, and her mouth was warm and sweet.

"Gee!" he whispered at last. "And I thought—"

"From now on, I do the thinking," Ruth said, and kissed his chin. "You just sell gas and fix cars. Okay?"

"Okay," Barry said, and held her tightly. But that lay in the future, right now, the cars could wait.

In Our Next Issue . . . . .

TOP-DRAWER STORIES

—BY—

TOP-NOTCH WRITERS

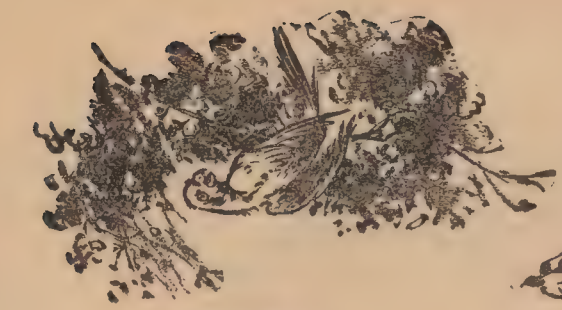
Crime and murder as you like it——
The West — Flying — War — Sports

HEADLINERS

GRUBER **HENDRYX**
CAFFREY **MARQUIS**

All These and Others Too!

IN NOVEMBER 25 SHORT STORIES



. . . from the Early Days of Convict Transportation New South Wales Had Been Infested with Bushrangers

NEW CHUM

By WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

FROM the deck of the *City of London* James Lawson looked across the sunlit water of the bay at the raw young town sprawling up the slope beyond. Ten thousand sparkles of light were reflected from the waves that rippled gently in from Sydney Heads. Green islands studded the harbor and charming inlets hid behind small promontories. The port was humming with life. A schooner beat in from the open sea, sails spread. At one of the wharves a merchantman from San Francisco disgorged its cargo. Another from Shanghai was slipping from its pier to head for home. Small boats moved in and out among the larger vessels.

No fairer sight could have been seen than this far-flung seat of British empire. Lawson turned, to look at a ship they were drifting slowly toward. It was less than a stone's throw from them, and he read the name *Success* on its bow. In the light breeze the flag of England flew bravely at the masthead.

Some unusual rite was taking place on the

desk. Armed soldiers stood at the forecastle head, on the bridge, and at other spots. A man in baggy gray trousers and yellow jacket, with broad arrows stamped in the cloth, stood in front of a large triangle. In the fellow's hand was a heavy leather whip with nine lashes. He was running his fingers through the ends to separate them. Flanked by two soldiers, another man appeared at the top of the companionway. He too wore the yellow jacket decorated with broad arrows. Two rings were fastened to his ankles, connected by a heavy chain that dragged along the deck. The man was brought forward and fastened to the triangle, face toward it.

A pressure tightened around the heart of Lawson. He knew now what he was about to see. This must be the famous ship used to transport felons from England to Australia and Van Dieman's Land. He had heard of the brutal treatment given insubordinate convicts. The man roped to the triangle had been dragged up for a flogging.

The sailors and passengers of the *City of London* crowded to the deck rail for a better position.

"Lay you a bob he's in for a Botany Bay dozen," a mahogany-faced old tar with a queue predicted.

"What is a Botany Bay dozen?" Lawson asked.

"Twenty-five with the cat on his bare back," the seaman answered. "He'll be cut to ribbons."

A red-coated British officer took a cheroot from his mouth and announced that the prisoner was to get twenty-five hard for attempting to start a mutiny among the convicts. He stepped back and gave a signal to the flogger. The whip rose and fell. Drops of blood stood out where the lashes had ripped away the skin. The torso of the victim writhed and his arms strained at the triangle. The whip whined again and descended heavily on the brown back of the shackled man. It moved with dreadful rhythmic regularity, each stroke tearing the flesh. A doctor standing beside the officer counted each blow audibly. At the twelfth he stepped forward and felt the pulse of the tortured convict. He nodded to the flogger to continue.

Fifteen—sixteen—seventeen. During the first ten strokes the convict had struggled violently at his bonds, occasionally letting out a sob of agony. Now he was screaming with pain. When they freed him his body sank heavily and his shaven head dropped on his breast. But as the soldiers turned to take him to the companionway Lawson caught a glimpse of the twisted grimacing face.

The sight of it shocked him. He knew the man. The convict was his cousin, Peter Conway, on whose behalf he had come to Australia.

II

SYDNEY was a young vital town still afflicted with growing pains. As Lawson walked up George Street squalor elbowed wealth. Side by side with fine public buildings were the tin-roofed shanties of the first settlers. Yesterday it had been a frontier camp. Tomorrow it was to become the greatest city in the antipodes. It was a place of contrasts. Half-naked bushmen moved aside to let pass a carriage drawn by blooded horses. A gang of convicts supervised by a ticket-of-leave man were patching up a bit of bad road in front of a fine store displaying the latest style of dresses imported from London. Big lusty sheepmen from the back blocks galloped down the street and splashed mud on new chums just arrived. Public houses were on every corner. James Lawson got the impression of a population young, hot-blooded, and prodigal, with the strength and endurance to build a great country.

After persistent inquiry he reached the office of Lawrence Bradley, solicitor. The lawyer was discussing with another man a racehorse they owned in common. There was about him none of the smug neatness characteristic of his class in England. He was a big blond man with a two-day beard, carelessly dressed, his blue shirt open and displaying a tanned hairy throat. His language was at times vitriolic.

Peter Conway was, he said bluntly, a rotter. He had all the vices of the worst lags and made trouble wherever he was. His uncle, old Sam Conway, had after a good deal of trouble managed to get the fellow assigned to him. But the nephew was of no use on the station. He was lazy, a hard drinker and a trouble-maker. Old Sam had put up with him until he attempted to

seduce his eighteen-year-old cousin. Then Sam's temper had flared and he had ordered the scoundrel a flogging. A week later the owner of the station had been found in his bed, stabbed to death. The general opinion was that Peter was the murderer, but there was no sure proof. The man had been sent back to the government chain gang.

"I saw him get a Botany Bay dozen this morning at the flogging block on the *Success,*" Lawson said. "It seems a terrible way to treat a human being."

Bradley agreed, and added dryly that you couldn't mollycoddle any ruffian who tried to start a rush of the croppers. The whole system was probably wrong, but a fact that had to be faced was that the convicts must be held down with an iron hand. The safety of the community depended on it.

It was depressing for Lawson to discover that he had come so far to accomplish nothing. A letter from Peter Conway had brought him to Australia. It had been written at his uncle's station soon after his arrival there. He was, the man had claimed, a reformed character. Through tribulation he had been made to see the error of his ways. He intended to go straight now, and he implored his cousin to do his best to secure him a pardon. Of course the whole letter had been a piece of canting hypocrisy.

If Peter was as hopeless as Bradley said, Lawson told the solicitor he might as well take the next boat back.

"Why don't you go out to the Conway station and talk with your cousin Sally," Bradley suggested.

"She isn't any relation of mine," Lawson explained. "But perhaps I had better see her while I'm here."

He went up the river on a stern-wheeler bound for Parametta. In a short time he was in the bush. Narrow-leafed gum trees crowded to the banks. Parrakeets hung head downward from the limbs or flew across the stream, brilliant streaks of pink, green, blue, and salmon. Occasionally a laughing jackass flung out a discord.

A chain gang of twelve was being taken to an up-country station. The men sat huddled on the hot deck, dull and brutelike, all hope almost banished from their lives. The loveliness of the bush, under the bright gold and silver sky peculiar to Australia, meant nothing to them. They knew only the elemental facts of hate, fear, fatigue, pain, hunger, and thirst.

At Parametta a gig awaited Lawson. The driver of it was a bearded six footer in a checked flannel shirt and moleskin trousers. He was a young man not yet out of his teens, but already he had the lank lean brownness and the competent efficiency of the native Australian. A taciturn young fellow, he did not waste unnecessary talk on this new chum. When he answered questions it was with the fewest words possible. Only once was his disinterest shaken. It was after Lawson mentioned that he was a cousin of Peter Conway. The eyes of the driver grew steel-hard.

"I'd like to set the kangaroo dogs on him and see the ruffian torn to pieces," he said.

The sun in the blue sky beat down mercilessly on a parched land. A pair of dingoes trotted through the myall bushes and vanished. In the distance a cloud of fine dust marked the slow movement of a wagon drawn by half a dozen oxen. They passed an abandoned whim at the back of a ten-mile paddock.

TWO squatters with stations in the neighborhood stopped their horses to chat with the driver of the gig. They called him Tom, and they were introduced as Bruce Muir and Jim Davis. They were pleasant youths, born in Britain but now thorough colonists. The semi-tropical sun had burned their faces to a coffee color. Their cabbage-tree hats with chin straps were tilted jauntily. Every wrinkle in their trousers and linen shirts was thick with the dust of travel. They were on their way to pick up a mob of cattle that had strayed.

"Tell Miss Sally we'll be over Saturday," one of them shouted as they left.

Sally Conway turned out to be surprisingly attractive. She did not have the pink-cheeked fresh coloring of English girls. The dry Australian winds had tanned her, but beneath the smooth brown a warm beat of blood showed. The bones of the face were finely modeled and the eyes that met her guest directly were a very deep blue. Her body was strong and resilient, of a slender fullness, and she walked with the lithe grace of a hill woman.

Lawson had not met any women like her. She was no more sex-conscious toward him

than if she had been a boy. Now that her uncle was dead she was the boss of the station. Six men took orders from their young mistress with no resentment. To them she was friendly but cool, and from long contact with her uncle she had amazingly good business judgment. Feminine slants did not seem to enter her human relationships.

Except in the bitterness of her feeling against Peter Conway. She hated the man with an intensity even her contempt for him could not cool.

"Uncle Sam saved him from the chain gang, brought him to the station, and treated him like a son," she told Lawson. "He wouldn't work. He drank hard all the time—tried to stir up the other men against uncle—was insolent and supercilious. That wasn't all. He had the cheek to think I would be interested in him—scum of the earth. The fellow would not let me alone. I could have handled the scoundrel all right, but one of our men heard him annoying me and told Uncle Sam, who got very angry and had him flogged. A week later the villain murdered and robbed my uncle, then disappeared into the bush. We hunted him down and turned him over to the government. Since it couldn't be proved he had done the killing he wasn't hanged as he should have been."

Lawson told her of the flogging he had witnessed from the deck of the *City of London*. The eyes of the girl shone with angry malice.

"I'm glad," she cried fiercely. "I would not let our men kill him, but I want him to suffer."

She treated her guest hospitably and urged him to stay as long as he liked. He was a good-looking young fellow, a keen sportsman, and very quickly became enamored with the free life of the back blocks. Since he was strong and willing to work, the riders on the station accepted him quickly as one of them. He had the good sense to realize that the less he said about British ways of life the better they would be pleased. One of the pests of the colony was the new chums who came out and talked incessantly about the superiority of the old country.

Sally differed from the men in that respect. She was avid to learn all she could about the homeland she had left as a baby. He told her, under pressure, of London—the Tower, its theaters, the queen, the new writers Dickens and Thackeray—and of the trim countryside and staid existence of those who dwelt on farms and in quiet villages far from the busy traffic of the capital.

Sally gave him news one evening as he rode back in soiled and sweaty dungarees with the sheep shearers. Peter Conway had headed a rush of croppers and escaped. Most of the convicts had been quickly recaptured, but the leader had gone bush and was still free. The story was in the Sydney newspaper.

"He'll join a gang of bushrangers and likely hold up this station," predicted Tom. "He's a vindictive devil."

"Yes." Sally frowned thoughtfully. "He might do just that. We had better keep guns loaded."

An old sundowner who was helping with the shearing shook his head. "Don't think so. If he has the sense of a louse, he is 'way back in the hills and will stay there. The country around here is too settled for the likes of him."

OVER their tea James Lawson and Sally discussed this new development. The two English boys had been together at one of the minor Public Schools. Even in those days Peter Conway had been regarded as rather a bad egg. He was a confirmed rule breaker and had several times been sent up to the Head for a thrashing. Neither football nor cricket interested him. His offenses were of the sneaking type, not bold and daring. The influence he exerted over lads in the lower forms was deplorable. Eventually he had been expelled, gone to London, become a clerk, and forged his master's name to a check.

"Tom is right about one thing," Sally decided. "He'll have to join a bushranger gang. There is no other place open for him. He can't just drift around among the ticket-of-leave shanty keepers where sundowners and cattle duffers go to knock down their checks and stay until they are broke. They would sell him to the constables for the reward."

From the early days of convict transportation New South Wales had been infested with bushrangers who preyed upon the settlers. Most of them were escaped felons who had fled into the scrub. For two gen-

erations they roamed the country plundering and murdering. Convoys and stages from the rich gold fields were attacked, sheep stations stuck up, and travelers robbed. Since the bush could not support them, they were forced to live on the districts in which they holed up. Ultimate capture was a certainty, for the colonial police hunted them like wolves. More than thirty were hanged in one year at Sydney, and because of their desperate situation they frequently killed out of wantonness and the need to get rid of witnesses who might later testify against them.

THE free and easy life at the station went on much as before, except that one man armed with a rifle always stayed at the house as a guard. Lawson had expected to return to Sydney in a few days, en route for England, but the escape of his convict cousin made a change in his plans. He explained to Sally that he thought he had better stay as long as Peter was on the loose. Because he was doing a man's work on the station without wages he did not feel that he was imposing on her hospitality.

By the quick light in her eyes he knew the girl was pleased. She had plenty of admirers. Bruce Muir and Jim Davis called frequently. They were both clean eligible young fellows who had more than once intimated their eagerness to join hands with her permanently. Tom was in love with her, though he had never mentioned it. The names of four or five others could be added as candidates for her favor. Her friendship with Jim Lawson was apparently on another basis. He paid her no compliments and never approached sentimentality, unless that word could be used of the songs he sang to the accompaniment of her playing.

Squatted under a eucalyptus tree in the darkness of the velvet Australian evening, Tom sometimes listened to Lawson's clear tenor with a touch of envy. Sally might be a cool young business woman with no nonsense about her, but she was also a girl who must have dreams in her head about the future, and this stranger from over the seas might be the one who would set a fire burning in her virginal heart. After the singing there was always laughter and chaffing, but their gayety could be an escape for acknowledgement of a growing passion. When Tom tried to sing his voice was a hoarse croak, and he could not tell exciting tales about far-away lands or talk about Tennyson's poetry or George Eliot's "Mill on the Floss." Jim Lawson was a clean-cut athletic young fellow, gay and friendly, with added advantages of education and family. Tom had known he could never win his charming mistress, but none the less he felt that nature ought not to play favorites by giving one man as much as Lawson had and top it off with a voice that could wring the heart of a ticket-of-leave shanty keeper. One comfort was that Lawson was jammock, a good fellow and not a scoundrelly flash cove like Peter Conway.

If this was a wooing it differed from that of Sally's other suitors. When she and Jim Lawson were together there were never any soft looks or blushes. They were as casual as a pair of puppies. But what was Tom to think when that rich voice rolled out tenderly:

"O, my love's like a red, red rose,
That's newly sprung in June.
O, my love's like the melodie,
That's sweetly played in tune."

And when the singer finished with the promise that he would love her still, "Till a' the seas gang dry," Tom rose with a deep sigh and retired to his hut. He could stand no more of this unfair competition.

III

THE bushrangers were camped at Jackaroo's Gully. There were three of them, and each one hated the others. Nothing held them together but their common sense of danger, the urgent knowledge that one man alone could not survive in the bush. He had to have companions both for offense and defense.

Of the three Peter Conway made the best appearance. His was a soul lost in villainy but there still cropped out of face and manner some hint of the man he might have been. The others were both ignorant and vicious, on their faces stamped a long story of degeneration. One known as Black Dan was a huge misshapen ruffian with rounded shoulders and apelike arms. The third was small, quick as a bird in his movements, his

alert eyes black and shiny, the lower part of the face foxlike in its pointed slyness.

They were playing cards with a broken-backed pack, and the Fox, as the little man was called, was winning the money of the others. A line of patter streamed out of the mouth of the pint-sized outlaw, designed to imbue his companions with the impression that he was merely getting back his own. He had not won for a month, blimey. It was a caution how a man's blankety blank luck could run out on a cove just like a woman.

The chatter of a magpie interrupted his too dexterous shuffling. "Gawd, them magpies!" he said, and glanced up at the bird to divert for an instant the attention of the others. "They mind me of how I used to go birdnesting in Epping Forest."

From out of the scrub a long co-o-o-o-e-y came, the far-reaching cry of the Australian bushman. The men waited, the game suspended.

"That'll be Blinky," muttered Black. "Time he was gettin' back."

"Maybe it's Blinky, and maybe it's not." In one swift movement the Fox reached his feet, revolver out. "I don't take nothing for granted, not me."

The cooey came again, much nearer. Through the trees they caught sight of an approaching man. He was bandy-legged and thin, dressed like a gully-raker who had not indulged in a bath for a month. His boots were down-at-the-heel, his dungarees ragged. The horse he rode was tired.

"Put that gun away, damn your eyes!" Blinky growled at the little man.

"You're late," Conway said.

"Ran into a duster. Crept under a rock and kept my face covered. Looked like I wouldn't get out of it alive."

"Going or coming?" Conway asked.

"Coming back. Found a soak by luck when my throat was like chalk."

"What luck at the station?"

Blinky glared at Conway. "I'll talk after I've had damper and tea—not before."

They made tea in a tin, warmed some damper, and found for him the cooked hindquarters of a kangaroo rat.

AFTER he had eaten he reported that they were sheep shearing at the Conway Station. He had passed as an old sundowner and been given a day's job as a helper. There were seven men at the station.

"Seven," Conway interrupted. "There used to be six."

"There's a new chum named Lawson, a guest. He and the missus were hittin' it off fine."

"Lawson—not Jim Lawson?" Conway cried.

"Righto."

"A bloke about twenty-five—acts like he's cock-a-doodle-do—has a good line of talk—sort of bird a woman might think handsome?"

"That's Mr. Lawson. Don't tell me you know him."

"He's my cousin. Must have gone to the station to find me."

"Was he a lag too?" the Fox asked.

"Not he. The fellow is tame as a house cat, a milk and water mollycoddle." Conway added a comment irritably. "I never could stand his pious ways."

"Cut the cackle," ordered Black Dan roughly. "Question is, do we or don't we stick up the station? Has it a store where we can help ourselves to food and ammunition?"

Conway assured him that it had, a well-stocked one.

They were nearly out of supplies and decided that the Conway Station was as good a place to strike as any other. The Fox had one more question. "What about this gal that owns the blasted place—has she got ginger and looks?"

Peter Conway turned on him snarling. "Don't get ideas. I'll take care of her. She hunted me down like a dingo and turned me back to the chain gang. I won't stand for any interference."

They saddled and rode out from the gully about sunset. With the coming of evening the heat of the day died down. A light cool breeze began to stir. Under a sliver of moon they traveled across a broken country sown with scrub. The terrain grew more broken. Hill spurs became more frequent. They came to a district of blue-gums. A small stream ran down a gully.

Black Dan swung from the saddle. "Be light soon. We'll camp here and sleep."

In the sand beside the campfire Conway drew with the end of a branch a map of the station they were going to stick up. The

shearing shed was about a quarter of a mile from the house. The attack would be in the morning, when all but one of the hands would be away busy at work. They would try to sneak up on the house and disarm the guard without a struggle. If no shots were fired they might pull off the job without attracting the attention of those at the shearing shed. Even if they did not succeed in this they could pick off with their rifles the workers as they came to the rescue. The girl and the woman who cooked for her could be kept in the forefront to prevent accurate shooting at the bushrangers.

IV

SALLY came out to the long vine-covered porch and smiled at the young man sitting on a step with a rifle across his knees.

"I'm wasting the time of a good man," she said. "The bushrangers aren't going to bother us. We're too strong. Eh, Tim?"

Tim Muldoon was nineteen, and he considered that he had been a man for at least two years. "I wish they would. I'd like to get a crack at Pete Conway." He grinned back at her, to mitigate the effect of his boasting.

"He may not have tied up with any gang," she suggested. "I wouldn't be surprised if he had got lost in the bush and died of thirst. I'm going over to the store to check up on our supplies. We're getting short. I'll be sending you to Parametta tomorrow with a list of goods we need."

The lad's eyes followed her as she walked across the yard to the store, a small frame building fifty yards distant. It was a pleasure to see the strong light tread of the girl. She carried her straight slender body as if mere living was a joy. When she had unlocked the door and vanished inside the store Tim got up and wandered around to the back of the house. He was a favorite of the cook and sometimes she slipped him a piece of cake. It was amazing how hungry he could get between meals.

Sally's gaze roamed over the shelves and she jotted down items beginning to get short. Plenty of tea and sugar. Better get another barrel of flour. And a dozen pots of marmalade. She would have to stock up on tinned goods and tobacco. Which reminded her that Tom had asked her to get him a pipe.

A shadow darkened the doorway. She stopped writing, pencil poised. A jeering voice sent a scunner through her.

"Dear little Sally," it said, "I couldn't stand it away from you any longer."

She knew before she turned her head what she would see, the evil grin of the man who had murdered her uncle. He had stepped inside, to escape observation by anybody else who might be around. The raffish scoundrel leaned an arm on the counter and lit a cheroot while he gloated over her, his rifle within easy reach.

"I wouldn't shout if I were you," he warned. "We're all over the place. This is a stick-up."

He wore imported cord riding breeches, well-made but dusty boots, a linen shirt of good quality. She found time to wonder how he had got such clothes in the bush. He could have told her he had taken them from the body of a young English traveler he had held up and left dead in the scrub.

"So you want to go back to the chain gang," she said scornfully. Though her heart was pounding fast, she held her eyes steady and her head high.

Temper flared in his malevolent face. "I'm not forgettin' your kindness in sending me back last time. Twice I've had my back peeled on account of you. Before I'm through it will be your turn to yelp. You'll crawl to me on your knees, missie."

She spoke sharply. "What do you want?" A leaden band was tightening around her stomach muscles. He had not come alone. She was sure of that. A band of bushrangers must be with him.

"You're going to take a little ride with us into the bush, dearie, after we have looted the place and burned the house."

"I have a dozen men working less than three hundred yards away," she said.

"Good. We'll pick them off with rifles if they show up."

A second man had come into the store, a ferret-faced fellow carrying a pistol in one hand and a sack in the other.

"Everything all right?" Conway asked.

"So far. Black Dan is close to the house, to get the man with the rifle if he can without firing. We'd better get busy loading stuff. May have to pull out sudden."

"Help yourself," Conway said, waving a hand at the shelves. "Anything you think we need."

THE dwarfish bushranger showed his black broken teeth in what was meant to be an ingratiating smile. "Pleased to meet you, Miss. We gents of the bush don't get many chances to meet nice young ladies. If you're going with us—as I hear you are—we'll be right pleased to welcome you to the Black Dan gang. Top notchers, we are, ma'am. Treated fine, you'll be."

"If you want to leave with a whole skin you'll get out of here as fast as you can," Sally warned. "In a few minutes it will be too late."

"On the way we picked up a nice little filly for you," he went on. "I hooked it myself from a paddock." He took off his shapeless hat and bowed. "Present from yours truly."

"Get on with your job, you scut," Conway snapped.

"Don't crowd me," the Fox said, the sting of a whiplash in his soft voice. "It ain't supposed to be healthy." But he filled the sack, found another back of the counter, and began to stuff tinned goods into it.

A shot rang out. The sound of it brought the two men to sharp attention. Conway ran to the door and looked toward the house.

"That's spilt it," he cried. "Get the stuff to the horses, Foxy. Be waiting for us. I'll stick it here till we hear from Dan."

Two rifles crashed, so close that the sound was almost one. Black Dan and Blinky came round the corner of the house. The huge bushranger was walking strangely, his great body sagging with each step, the weight of it first on one and then on the other shambling leg. A rifle hung lax in one hand, the end of it trailing on the ground. Outspread fingers of the other hand clutched at his stomach. Blinky broke into a run for the eucalyptus grove where the horses were tied.

Another man came into sight around the house. Black Dan was already sinking to the ground, Blinky halfway to the grove. The man paid no attention to either of them. He raced toward the store, a rifle in his hands.

"Goddlemighty, it's Jim Lawson," Conway cried.

He whirled and fired a wild shot at his cousin Sally. As the rifle was coming up she flung herself down behind the counter. He fled from the building, straight for the horses. Already the Fox was galloping down the pad and Blinky was swinging into the saddle.

Lawson deflected, to cut off Conway from the mounts. Every step brought the two men closer to each other. The bushranger was in a panic to escape. Without stopping, he threw a bullet at Lawson and then another. They were not thirty yards apart.

James Lawson pulled up, took careful aim, and fired. The bushranger spun around like a top, flung by the shock of the bullet, and went down in his tracks. Almost before he hit the ground he was dead, but Lawson did not wait to find out. He hurried to the store.

Sally, white and shaken, came to the door to meet him.

"Have they gone?" she asked.

"Two of them," he replied. "The others—won't go."

"You killed them?" she asked.

"I don't know whether they are dead yet. There was a shot in the store. I was frightened about you."

"I dived behind the counter as he fired," she explained.

Neither of them had consciously willed it so, but she was in his arms, clinging close to him, her body trembling and weak.

"I was afraid to cry out, for fear you might come and be shot," she told him.

He explained his presence. "I was on the way to get a sharper pair of shears. I don't know why I brought my rifle, unless because the fear of this has been in my mind. The first I knew of the trouble was when I saw the big fellow shoot down Tim. I got the first crack at him and must have wounded him badly. Tim told me you were at the store.

"When I came around the house I saw Peter Conway in the doorway. He turned back and fired. I felt it must be at you. That's why I killed him."

"You killed Peter?"

"I think he is dead."

"Don't be sorry, Jim. He's better dead. They would have hanged him."

"I knew him when he was a little boy," he said. "We played together as kids."

"You couldn't help it because he went bad," Sally comforted.

'No." He said, reluctantly, "I was always afraid he would. As a little fellow I licked him once for pulling wings off flies."

Tom joined them. "We heard the firing. It's the Black Dan gang. Dan and Conway are both dead." He grinned at Lawson admiringly. "For a new chum you're jammock. The constables have been hunting this gang for years."

"What about Tim?" Lawson asked.

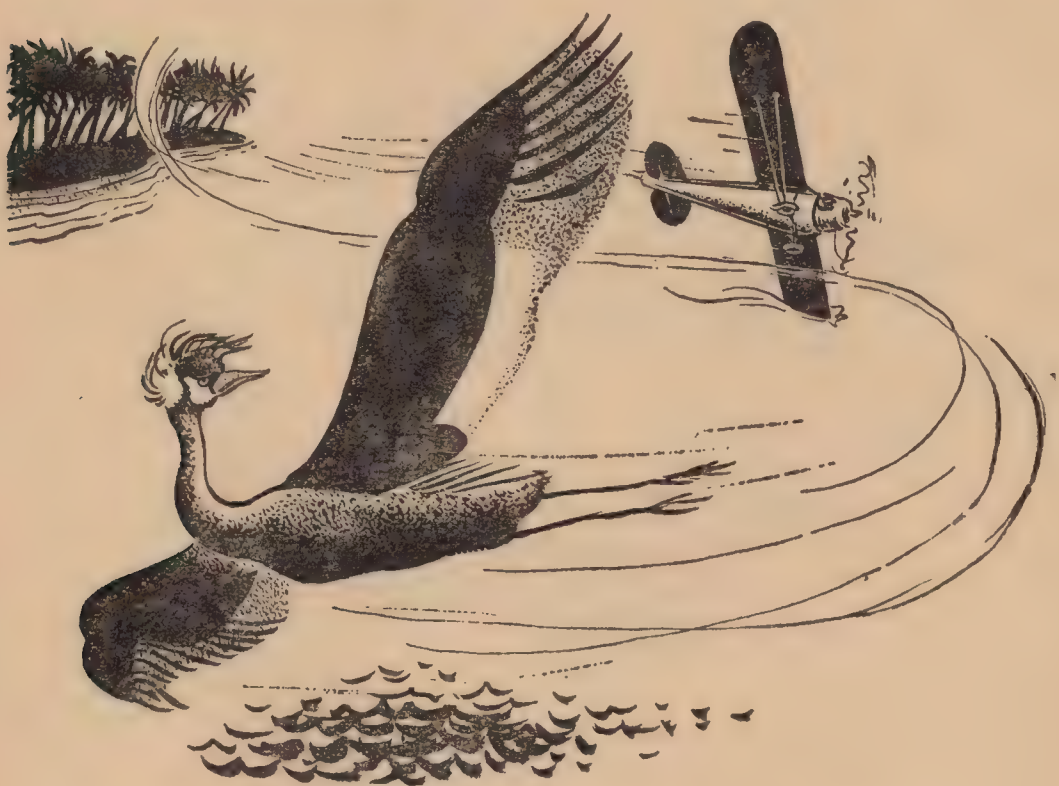
"In the shoulder. Not too bad, I'd say. One of the boys has gone for the doctor." He looked at Sally. "You're not hurt?"

"No. I ducked back of the counter before Peter fired." She turned to Lawson and smiled.

"That's fine." Tom shifted his eyes to the new chum. "For both of you," he added dryly.

Lawson tucked his arm under Sally's elbow. "How right you are, Tom," he answered.

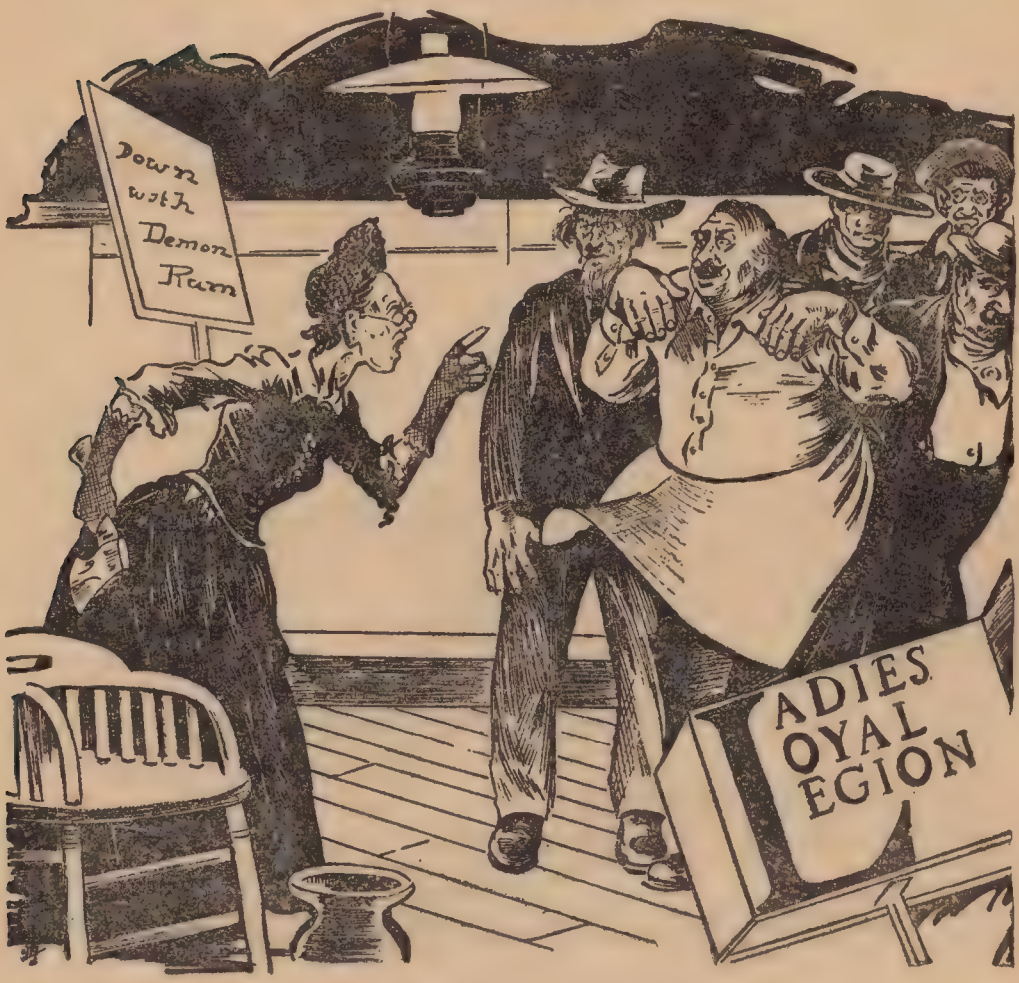
NEW ZEALAND Seemed a Heck of a Place to Fight Out the War; and with Some of Those Flying Boys So Good That Even the Cranes in the Lagoon—No Mean Wing Performers Themselves—Stood One-Legged to Watch the U. S. Air Force in Action . . . . . .



"Service for Kaka and Kakapo"

A Novelette by A. A. CAFFREY in Our Next Issue

Hatchet Hattie Smites Jezebel



By STUART M. EMERY

THE gleaming-polished shoes of Union Jones beat a sturdy rataplan on the board sidewalk as he marched along the arcades to an accompanying chorus of amazed ejaculations. Gone were the ink-stained flannel shirt and the patched blue-jeans and the copper-toed boots that Jezebel knew; gone was the sweat of honest toil from his blazing red face and its stains from his gnarled hands. Union Jones, tramp printer and right bower of Major "Shenandoah" Smyth's *Courier*, paraded Silver Street in the blazing Arizona sunlight clad in a perfectly-fitting suit of sober and expensive black, a clean black slouch hat with the insignia of the Grand Army of the Republic crowned his desert-tanned cranium, his stiff shirt and low collar were immaculate. His grizzled beard was trimmed to its final hair, his blunt nose jutted confidently.

This was a Union Jones that tempestuous boomtown Jezebel had never seen before and Jezebel's citizens, boiling along the side-

It Was Being Assassinated Twice That Was Just too Much for Union Jones

walks of the hard-packed desert street or standing around propping up its false fronts with their backs, stared in incredulity. But it was not a silent incredulity, it was vocal.

"My gaw, lookit Union Jones! He looks like Gineral Grant!"

"Union Jones he has married a rich woman at last!"

Union Jones glared in righteous rebuke at the perspiring, shaggy-bearded miner who had flung the last remark at him.

"Envy an' malice be the curse o' the lower classes, Bushface Biggs," he pronounced. "An' yellin' and makin' invidious remarks in public be a sign you are no gentleman. Outer my way, you uncurried mine mule!"

The miner stepped aside. Two cowponies attached to the hitchrail of the Arizona Palace Saloon shied violently and a Mexican lounging against its window gulped and swallowed half a corn shuck cigarette as Union Jones entered the batwing doors. Behind the bar Push-'em-Up Regan, small and spruce, the fastest bartender west of the Pecos, looked up and clapped a hand to his brow as though suddenly struck by his own beer maul.

"Union Jones! Mister Jones! You are transmogrified!"

"Push-'em-Up Regan, you shut yore trap," ordered Union. "An' you gimme half a dozen twenty-fi' cent seegars. No likker!"

"Clean shirt, clean suit, two-bit cigars, no likker! Union Jones, you are—"

"Never you mind what I am. I be on my way ter the bank ter transact a hunk o' prodijious bizness after which it be not essential fer me ter remain sober. You keep this package fer me till I want it." Union passed a small parcel, wrapped in store paper, over the bar. "Now, a glass o' lithia water."

"Lithia water, Union? We got no water with lithia in it in Jezebel, only alkali. But I can give you some nice, stomach-turning sarsaparilla—like the drink those two pillars of American womanhood are guzzling at yonder table. Lookit 'em, Union; did you ever inspect a more formidable pair of newcomer females?"

FROM front to back of its low-raftered premises the Arizona Palace teemed with its customary activity. Bar and gambling tables were filled, shouts and rough jests rose, the aromas of mine grime, range-riding leather, tobacco smoke and redeye permeated the scene. The table that Push-'em-Up indicated was like a tiny island of respectability in a sea of unrefined turbulence. Two middle-aged bonneted figures in rusty, billowing black sat there, side by side, glasses of sarsaparilla before them.

Their height and size, even sitting down, could not be disguised; each was close to six feet tall. One of them was of pronouncedly muscular build with Irish features, and the other vastly fat and Germanic. Their mittened hands toyed daintly with their glasses but they were big hands. They were looking toward the bar and Union saw their faces—hard, determined and purposeful. They looked like pallid masks in the setting of their rusty bonnets with the crepe streamers and the long black veils thrown back. The fat one possessed cheeks that expanded balloonlike and a hanging double chin.

"Quite the respectable widder wimmen, ain't they, Union?" inquired Push-'em-Up with his customary cynical amiability. "The Arizony Palace can not very well bar its doors to respectable widder wimmen when all the dance hall girls what git tired of having their feet stepped on bring their gentlemen friends over here from two o'clock in the morning on to refresh their larynxes with our redeye and buck-the-tiger. When costly spangled skirts and silk stockings are free to come in you can not keep out honest black bombazine and cotton hosiery. You ask me, I should say those pillars of American womanhood are a couple of battleaxes."

Union shuddered. "Formidable be the word fer 'em. They look like wimmen what have got minds o' their own, than which they be nuthin' more dangerous in this world. They be positively menacin' but what harm kin they do in Jezebel unless they remarry? Slewfoot! Look out!"

His cry came too late. The diminutive, wizened swamper carrying the tin tray of bourbons from the bar had already stumbled over one of his own feet and his load, plunging onto the women's table, sent a cataract of liquor pouring across it into their laps. Redeye met widow's weeds and saturated them.

"Push-'em-Up, yore apron!" gasped Union and seized the clean cloth across the bar. "Beautiful or not, a gentleman's duty be ter aid a female in distress."

He rushed forward. Both the widows were up, their skirts hanging in damp ruin and their faces twisted with unladylike fury.

"You filthy scum!" flung out the fat one in a gravelly voice.

"I'm s-sorry, ma'am," gabbled the swamper in terror, flicking his bar towel from his belt.

"That be Slewfoot Lum, ma'am," said Union gallantly. "He is always a-spillin' o' good likker. Leave us repair the damages an' the Arizony Palace will give you a free drink an' a seegar. Leddy, kin I aid?"

He stepped to the side of the Irish-appearing widow, who was dabbing at her skirt with her handkerchief. Slewfoot crouched on one knee, trying to wipe at the fat woman's dress.

"Blast you!" she cast out. "Get away from me!"

Her button-shoed foot came up in a violent kick that took Slewfoot in the chest and sent him sprawling. The black bombazine skirt billowed up with the rush of the kick and Union saw the darned cotton stocking that clad the thick limb. He saw, too, the

long knife that nested in its sheath, strapped to the leg, before the skirt fell back. He blinked in amazement, mechanically fumbling with Push-'em-Up's apron. Savagely his hand was knocked away.

"Don't you touch me!" ordered the second relict in a brogue of deep timber. "Don't you—"

"I am brushin' the wet from the side o' yore dress, that be all, ma'am," answered Union and pressed the apron against the flouncing bombazine at the lady's hip. Again he blinked as his hand struck a hard, unyielding object in the pocket whose nature could not be concealed.

"Sister O'Brien!" exclaimed the fat widow. "Let us go from this den! It shall pay for this outrage!"

"Yes, Sister Schmidt," said the Irishwoman, "it shall pay!" Heads high and faces crimson with rage the pair of females marched out of the saloon and Union scratched his head.

"An' now jest what be this?" he muttered. "A snickersnee tied on the leg o' one respectable widder woman an' that was a six-gun I teched in the skirt pockit o' my particlar relit. Mebbe they pack 'em in order ter pertect themselves against the hands o' man. Or mebbe I be seein' things, which comes from bein' cold stiff sober. Push-'em-Up" he called over his shoulder, "I shall see you later. I must resume my triumphal progress."

He shot his cuffs elegantly, put his shoulders back and strode through the door and down the street. He reached the small plaza running back from the street where the Bank of Jezebel had its location and, still pursued by shouts and catcalls, turned onto its walk and stalked up to the plate glass front of the red brick institution. Once again he shot his cuffs and gave a last twitch to his string necktie.

"Cashier Dewberry Beanpole Stebbins be gonna fall down in a fit when he sees me," he opined and went through the door.

Two or three clerks were busy behind the low counter of the main room and in the cashier's cage a lathlike, unusually elongated man with tow hair parted in the middle and a long nose was arranging cash in the drawer and stacking bills. Dewberry Stebbins, late of Hartford, Connecticut, better known as Beanpole, hadn't made a mistake in the cash or the customers' accounts since the bank had opened, Jezebel proudly claimed, while Dewberry Stebbins frankly asserted he had never made a mistake in his life.

"Beanpole," said Union, halting before the cage, "take yore hand outer the till and stop tamperin' with the samples. Jest because President Samuel Simon is outer town is no reason why you should start yore pilferin' in broad daylight."

Cashier Stebbins looked up from his task. His dry features cracked in a grin and his keen eyes brightened. "Well, if it ain't old Union Jones!" The words twanged out of his nose in a perfect Connecticut drawl. "All dressed up in his Sunday suit and fairly dripping Sattiday night bath water all over the floor of the bank. What brung you here in this condition, Union? Have you inherited?"

"I have. Cashier Beanpole Stebbins, I shall see you in the privit offis. It be too weighty a bizness matter ter be discussed out here."

"Okay, Union, old legatee," grinned Stebbins. "Henry!" he called to a clerk. "Take the cashier's wicket."

TOGETHER Union and Beanpole Stebbins passed down the counter and into the office of Samuel Simon, president of the Bank of Jezebel. It was a sunny, big-windowed room, furnished in frontier luxury with a long mahogany table, chairs and an expensive rug. A business desk with drawers reaching to the floor and a small safe were against the wall. In one corner hung the colorful Navajo blanket that screened the door to the sheet-metal-lined strong-room.

Union moved promptly around behind the table and sat down in the swivel chair. Within easy reach on the mahogany stood a silver tray with a decanter and glasses on it and a box of cigars. Union made a parched sound and his hand automatically started out.

"Help yourself, Union," invited Stebbins wryly. "As an inheritor and potential customer you may partake freely of the Bank of Jezebel's select stock. What did you inherit?"

Union tilted a huge shot of the Bank of Jezebel's bourbon into himself and gagged. His eyes bulged and as he fought for breath he reached out and appropriated a cigar from the box.

"I have inherited the *Courier* fer two weeks, Beanpole," he announced, putting his feet up on the table and emitting a fragrant cloud of smoke from his blunt nostrils. "Major Shenandoah Smyth an' Mister Samuel Simon, yore employer, have gone off on a huntin' trip, ain't they?" Cashier Stebbins nodded.

"Yestiddy evenin', Major Shenandoah he calls me in ter him an' informs me what I am the editor o' the *Courier* in his absence, pro temporaneously, an' that it is not befittin' the editor o' the *Courier* ter go hellin' around in an ole shirt an' bluejeans. He give me ten bucks ter git my Sunday suit outer hock with Moe Fineberg, the tailor, with strict orders ter wear it allus in public an' he also gimme this."

From Union's pocket came an envelope and he tossed it airily toward Stebbins. "Major Shenandoah's written order ter gimme full access ter the *Courier's* funds in the Bank o' Jezebel in order ter run the paper. I am ter pay all its expenses. Fer full access ter twenny thousand dollars I be willin' ter suffer the torments of a stiff collar an' a stuffed shirt an' a black Sunday suit."

"Nineteen thousand, four hundred and ten dollars, Union," announced Cashier Stebbins. "I made up the *Courier's* monthly statement two days ago."

Union Jones tilted another drink into the glass and into himself. "You scamper right out an' bring me that ten bucks, Beanpole. I need it fer whiskey. Ouch!" He reached around under the rear of his coat, grimacing. "That gorryblasted key ter Madame Santa Fé's front door be stickin' inter my—you know what." From his hip pocket he produced a strange object. It was a big metal door key with an inch-square, foot-long hunk of wood attached by a ring. He tossed it onto the mahogany. "Madame Santa Fé, she locks the front door of her boardin' house at midnight prompt, bein' a respectable place, an' every lodger has a key. But you know what her lodgers are like."

"Like you," remarked Cashier Stebbins.

"Thirty—forty front-door keys her lodgers lost before she hung this timber on 'em. Now they can't git lost or if they do, they are turned inter the nearest saloon which sends 'em back ter Madame Santa Fé. You run out an' git me that ten bucks, Beanpole, like I told you. I have did my prodijious bizness with the Bank o' Jezebel an' now I kin relax."

OVER the desert sands, shrill and piercing, sounding from the silver mountain that loomed to the north, traveled the blast of a steam whistle.

"Noon shift," said Cashier Stebbins. "Time for lunch. Me, I am stepping across the street for my frugal midday meal of java and sinkers. By this most trusting document," he tapped the order, "I can foresee the downfall of the *Courier* by Sattiday. I shall tell Henry outside to give you the ten bucks as you go out."

Union Jones settled himself more comfortably on his spine. Once more his gaze strayed to the whiskey decanter.

"I think I shall set here a bit longer, Beanpole. I shall hold down the president's office while you are gone. I shall enjoy myself fancyin' that I am also the President o' the Bank o' Jezebel pro temporaneously. I be quite familiar with the layout." He reached for the decanter. "One more shot o' Mister Simon's magnificent bourbon, Beanpole, an' I shall actually think that I am the president."

"Go ahead and be the president," said Cashier Stebbins. "You bring in any new accounts while I am gone and I shall give you one percent commission. Mister Simon, he authorized me to be the manager of the Bank of Jezebel while he is off hunting, and I can transact any bank bizness I want to, just like you can run the *Courier*. So long, Union. The java and sinkers are calling."

Beanpole's elongated figure disappeared through the door and Union stared pleasedly about him, swelling his sturdy chest under its broadcloth. The room was sunlit and warm but not sweltering and he felt an expansive glow pervading his entire being. The minutes passed as he lolled at his ease.

"It is easy ter be a banker," he announced. "All you need is a Sunday suit an' a deludin'ly honest expression after which you set back drinkin' expensive whiskey an' smokin' big seegars an' do not let yore right hand know what yore left hand doeth, Banker Jones, ah! Let us prowl the premises."

He brought his feet down from the surface of the mahogany and they thumped on the floor. The steps of other feet sounded just outside the door but they were light.

Union Jones' forehead corrugated, his mouth twitched. Through the entrance advanced a figure in rusty black, bonneted and crepe-streamered, small and spectacled and rosy-cheeked with an air of subdued sweetness.

"Good gorrymighty!" he gasped. "It be another respectable widder woman! It be rainin' respectable widder wimmen!"

"This is the office of the president of the Bank of Jezebel?" inquired the newcomer in a low, husky voice. Her eyes behind the steel-rimmed spectacles seemed dilated as though she labored under some emotion. She carried a large handbag which she laid on the table.

"Yes, ma'am," gurgled Union, rising. "Set down, ma'am."

The lady seated herself opposite him. "You are the president of the Bank of Jezebel?"

"Arrgh, gurrh, warrgh!" Union strangled. I . . . er . . . have the honor of occupying the chair o' the president, ma'am."

"Good. I came directly in to see you without bothering to stop at the counter. I always deal personally with the president of any bank in which I make a deposit. I am Mrs. Harriet Wigton of Kansas, just arrived in your friendly little town, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Jedediah Jones, ma'am," got out Union.

"President Jedediah Jones," repeated the caller. "Let me say that you are the very picture of a solid, conservative frontier bank president. One in whom every trust could be reposed."

"Thank you, ma'am," returned Union. He stroked his grizzled, well-trimmed beard, assuming a profound air.

"I must, of course, have the fullest confidence in the president of the bank in which I deposit and its safeguards," went on the lady.

Union noticed now that although her chin was small, it was firm; her cheekbones also were firm. The sweet manner apparently overlay a strong character. "I am a widow, Banker Jones, and can take no chances with my funds."

"It be most unwise ter gamble with money, ma'am," said Union righteously. "Now, if you should wish ter make a deposit with the Bank o' Jezebel, o' some nice, healthy littul mite like $500—"

The Widow Wigton opened the bag that lay on the table. Her mittened hand drew out package after package of bills. They had the bank wrappers still around them and the value of each package was stamped on it in an appalling sum. The sweat burst out on Union Jones' brow, his face grew purple and his eyes threatened to leap from his head.

"One-thousand-buck bills!"

"Yes, President Jones. One hundred thousand dollars in all. To be credited to me, as your newest account, if you can meet my requirements."

"One hundred thousand bucks!" It was a ragged, indistinguishable murmur that the widow could not catch. "One percent on enny new account I bring in. One thousand dollars! Gaw!"

With a terrific effort Union recovered from his spasm. The gleam of a mad hope shone in his eyes. "Ma'am!" he said hoarsely, "ask me any questions what be on yore mind. I—I——" Instinctively his hand went out toward the decanter. It stopped as he saw the sudden look that came into the Widow Wigton's apple-cheeked face.

"You, a banker, drink? I will have no dealings with a banker who drinks."

"No, ma'am," said Union hastily. "I jest keep the spirituous fluid here fer the benefit o' the rather rough rancher customers, which likes a tot after doin' bizness an' one of whom has jest left, leavin' the bottle with its cork out. That would account fer the unpleasant aroma o' spirits permeatin' this offis."

"My husband died of drink," said the Widow Wigton. "After making a fortune."

"Tragical," remarked Union. "Most tragical."

"So I am devoting my life to doing good. I am the founder of the Ladies' Loyal Le-

gion. Even in Kansas I have heard of Jezebel."

"You have come ter the right place, ma'am," said Union heartily. "Jezebel kin do with more folks like you. Why on a Sattiday night here—" He folded his hands and smiled benignly. "Tut, tut! Misguided miners, ill-advised cowboys. Now——" He drew a big silver watch from his fob pocket, glancing at it surreptitiously under the cover of the table. "Ha'-past twelve an' that Connecticut buzzard will be back enny minnit," he murmured. "Ma'am!" He sprang to his feet, speaking urgently, "Lemme give you the layout. You see this?"

Crossing to the Navajo blanket, he swept it back on its rings, disclosing the metal door. "Sheet iron door to the strong-room, which also be lined with sheet iron." He tapped the round metal flap over the keyhole. "The lock, fer which I have the only key an' it never leaves my person or—er—my sight. That be it." He pointed to the timber-burdened object on the table. "A hand siren in the strong-room ter alarm all Jezebel, one in this offis an' two more outside. Every clerk has got a six-gun in his desk drawer. A guard every night a-settin' at this strong-room door with a Winchester. Ma'am, it would take dynamite laid right up against that lock ter git through that door. The Bank o' Jezebel be the safest bank west o' the Mississippi. Bandit-proof, we are, ma'am. Put yore money in with us an' fergit it—while it increases like so many rabbits."

"And how much cash money do you estimate there is in your strong-room at the present moment, Banker Jones?"

"I hear tell that there be—that is, ma'am, the monthly mine payrolls be in, the ranchers have got their cattle shippin' funds, the biznessmen keep big deposits—call it around $500,000."

"Five hundred thousand dollars!" exclaimed the Widow Wigton. "Banker Jones, you have impressed me more than favorably. I shall open my account."

UNION JONES drew a clean handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the perspiration from his brow. The light of triumph gleamed in his face.

"Moreover, I shall entrust to the Bank of Jezebel the safe investment of my funds, preferably in mortgages and government bonds. It was mortgages in which my husband made his fortune; mortgages, he always said, provide the only safe investment for a widow besides government bonds."

"Mortgages, I would advise, ma'am," said Union sagely, clasping his hands across his stomach and leaning back in his chair with an air of deep sagacity. "Well away from water where the river kin not walk away with the property an' also, well away from Injuns. Governmint bonds, in my opinion, do not allus turn out so good, as witness the bonds o 'the Confederit Governmint.".

He paused. Cashier Dewberry Stebbins had entered briskly, a toothpick in the corner of his mouth. "Union, you old—" Cashier Dewberry Stebbins halted in surprise.

"Cashier Dewberry Stebbins," said Union —and a grin of utter triumph cracked his grizzled beard, "lemme interdooce Mrs. Widder Wigton, the latest depositer in the Bank o' Jezebel. A new account o' one hundred thousand dollars, which I brung in durin' yore absence. Thar it lays as large as life an' twicet as encouragin'."

Cashier Stebbins' prominent Adam's-apple jerked up and down and he narrowly escaped swallowing his toothpick.

"One percent, Mister Cashier Stebbins," said Union.

"Why, you—you—er—ma'am. . . ." Beanpole Stebbins for the moment seemed to have lost his usual Connecticut coolness.

"Yes, I have decided to give the Bank of Jezebel my account of one hundred thousand dollars," said Widow Wigton. "My decision is due to the vigorous and detailed manner in which President Jones presented to me the picture of the assets and safeguards of the bank. You have in your strong-room yonder, I believe, the cash sum of five hundred thousand dollars?"

"Four hundred and ninety-five thousand, eight hundred and ninety dollars and some cents," recited Stebbins, fighting for poise.

"Cashier Stebbins is the bank's most trusted an' efficient employee, ma'am," pronounced Union. He fixed Beanpole with a glare. "I be certain that he would not wish ter see the amount o' one hundred thousand bucks go into some other pocket. Certainly not. Cashier Stebbins!" He motioned toward the plain working desk, "I shall now hand the further transaction o' this prodijious bizness over ter you. Hop to it."

"Beanpole Stebbins' eyes had regained the old financial look. "The Bank of Jezebel will be pleased to handle your account, Mrs. Wigton," he said in his best manner and went to the desk, bringing out papers from its drawers.

"Missus Wigton wishes also ter have the bank invest her money fer her, Cashier Stebbins."

Union Jones' grin grew broader as Stebbins' pen traveled over papers. The cashier came back to the table with the papers and the pen outstretched. "Signature card, ma'am. Authorization for the bank to invest your funds, two copies. Your new checkbook."

The widow signed with a practised ease and Cashier Stebbins gulped again. "Now," she announced and pointed to the door-key on its timber, "I wish to see you open the strong-room door with that key and deposit my funds."

Union Jones shuddered as Beanpole Stebbins stared at him. "Ah—er—we happen ter be tryin' us out a new device on the door, ma'am. Ah—warrgh—time lock." He brightened visibly at the inspiration. "It will not open till five o'clock this afternoon. In the meantime, Cashier Stebbins——"

Beanpole took the money carefully. His expert fingers riffled it like lightning. "One hundred thousand dollars exactly. I shall put it in the president's safe until the strong-room opens, Mrs. Wigton." Moving to the wall, he spun the dial of the safe, opened it and locked the money away inside.

"And now, Cashier Stebbins, would you leave us, closing the door behind you?" said the Widow Wigton. "I have further matters to discuss with Banker Jones in private."

Directing a glance at Union in which acidity mingled with admiration Beanpole Stebbins withdrew, shutting the door. The widow blinked her eyes behind her steel-rimmed spectacles.

"The sunlight. It is very strong. Could you draw the shade down?"

"Most assuredly, ma'am," said Union politely. He clumped over to the near window and reached for the string to the upraised roller. The window looked out on the desert, stretching limitless to the west, where lay the far blue blur of the mountains. A small army of empty bottles and cans decorated the desert sands behind Jezebel's buildings and a thick clump of mesquite stood perhaps two hundred yards away on the edge of a dry gully running down to the arroyo.

Something seemed to stir the outer fringe of the mesquite.

"Only halfway down." The widow spoke from beside Union. She had moved with him from the table. Her eyes were strangely soft. "Banker Jones, are you a married man?"

A frightful spasm twitched Union's sturdy figure. "Gawd ferbid!" he gurgled. A worse spasm shook him as the Widow Wigton's mittened hand rested suddenly, almost carressingly on his left arm, then withdrew.

"Marriage is a heavenly estate." A huge black-bordered handkerchief suddenly appeared in the widow's hand, and she unfolded it. "My late lamented and I—"

A sob racked the frail frame in the widow's weeds. The handkerchief came wide open, fluttered for a moment in the window and then went to the dimming eyes. In that same instant Union caught something that definitely moved in the mesquite. It thrust from cover, tubular and lethal, and it jetted smoke. Whistling, the bullet tore through the window, missing Union Jones' stiff-collared throat by an inch.

The second shot cracked, burying itself in the opposite wall. But Union Jones was no longer in the window, bared to the murderous attack. Wildly he had flung himself aside with the old sharpshooter's split-second reaction to danger, clutching the Widow Wigton about the waist.

"Hit the dirt!" he panted and brought her down to the floor with him. "Gorrymighty, but that one was close! Hug the rug, ma'am!"

HE RESTED a moment on the floor, and then crawled cautiously to the second window and peered over its sill. Above and beyond the clump of mesquite a tiny plume of dust rose that told its story.

"Fired an' ran fer it. He has fled from the scene o' his crime inter the arroyo. Now, who in——"

Abruptly he stopped. The Widow Wigton was lying on the floor where he had brought her down. Her eyes were closed and her mouth was open. She was out cold.

"Good gorrymighty, either she has fainted

or I brung her down so hard she hit her head agin the floor! Whiskey, quick!"

He leaped to his feet and halted. "No, I kin not douse a leddy like her with whiskey. She might withdraw her account. Smellin' salts is what a leddy like her yearns fer when she has a fit or a faint. An' she be the kind of a respectable widder woman would never be without 'em."

The Widow Wigton's bag was still clutched in her hand. Union wrenched it away and shook its contents onto the floor. It disgorged steel knitting needles and a ball of yarn, a paper of pins, a roll of black crepe ribbon, a volume of sermons and a hunk of beeswax among other feminine miscellany.

"Junk!" gasped Union. "Wimmen's junk. Nuthin' in the hull bag o' enny human use, except——" His hand had slid into an interior pocket in the side and emerged with unexpected objects. "Except this!" The Smith and Wesson revolver was small and beautifully made. Its nickel fittings glistened in his palm. The second object that had come out with it glistened also, a tip of needlelike steel that ran from a glass tube. "Leddy's six-gun an' a hypodermic needle. Fer self-defense while cartin' around a hundred thousand bucks an' insomnia at night, or ter produce happy dreams o' remarryin'. Ah!" He thrust back the finds and brought from another pocket the silver-stoppered bottle he recognized. "Whiff 'em in, leddy. I be not partial ter acrobatic spirits of ammonia myself."

THE Widow Wigton's eyelids fluttered as the smelling salts bottle went under her nose, her eyes opened and she found herself sitting up, braced by Union's arm.

"You be all right now, ma'am," he consoled her hoarsely. "You bumped yore skull, I reckon." The widow felt at the back of her head and nodded. Union helped her to her feet. "Some dirty unknown buzzard took a crack at me with a Winchester, ma'am. I had ter be a trifle roughish ter git you outer range. But why ennybody should take a crack at me I do not know."

"Perhaps it was not at you, Banker Jones," said Widow Wigton. "Perhaps it was at me."

"At you, ma'am!" Astonishment rode the words.

"I and my Ladies Loyal Legion have made many enemies among the hosts of vice. It is always the lot of those who seek to do good in their own humble way to incur the enmity of the sinful." She shook her head and blinked. "I have quite recovered, thanks to your tender ministrations, Banker Jones." The eyes behind the steel rims began to be soft and expressive again. "You have a way with a woman, Banker Jones, you would—"

THE sweat sprang to Union's forehead. He edged promptly away from Widow Wigton, his eyes seeking a route of escape. "I must throw myself outa that winder in pursuit o' yonder miscreant. That is——"

"Do so. Arouse the community. In the meantime, I shall return to my living quarters. No, do not see me to the front door out of your old-fashioned courtesy. I shall call upon you again soon, Banker Jones. I am sure that our friendship will become a beautiful thing."

"Gurrgh—warrgh—gloof!" Union Jones strangled and in the next moment he was alone. He crept to the door and watched the small figure in black pass out of the bank and safely onto the main street. "Beanpole "Stebbins!" he howled. "You come in here pronto!"

He was hurling a tumblerful of bourbon into his grizzled beard as Cashier Stebbins entered.

"Beanpole," he commanded, "you open that safe. One percent o' one hundred thousand dollars be one thousand bucks. You gimme."

"Lissen, Union, you old confidence man—"

"An' moreover, I been damn near assassinated. You hear enny shots a coupla minnits ago?"

"Shots are always goin' off in Jezebel. I have heard nothing."

"Lookit them two bullets embedded in the wall!" Union pointed. "They was fired through that winder. Somebody tried ter murder me."

"Union," said Beanpole Stebbins fervently, "I do not see why somebody shouldn't."

"An' wuss than some unknown buzzard tryin' ter encompass my demise by foul means—" The words rose in a frightful bellow. "That wealthy Widder Wigton—she be tryin' ter encompass marryin' me!"

II

"ONE thousand bucks, Beanpole. You gimme or I shall have the law on you fer fracturin' of an oral contract." Union glared at Cashier Dewberry Stebbins, who stood beside him at the crowded bar of the Arizona Palace. The violent colors of a desert sunset were flaming down Silver Street outside and the citizens of Jezebel, their day's work over, were pounding along the boardwalks and populating the oases of Jezebel.

Beanpole Stebbins pulled on his rum and fruit juice concoction through a straw. "Now, Union, my old friend," he said placatingly, "just lissen to reason and I am sure we can arrive at an amicable adjustment. Twenty-five dollars for your half-hour's work is plenty."

"It be reason I have bin talkin' fer hours!" Union's gnarled fist crashed on the bar and his bellow rose to the smoke-clouded rafters. "Calm an' cool I be! You be tryin' ter do me outer my honest commission, by bein' all soft an' wheedlin'. Do you not suppose I know that when a Connecticut banker gits all soft an' wheedlin', it means he ain't got a leg ter stand on? If he had a good case, he would be tough as hell an' say *no* in seven different langwidges, ter say nuthin' o' orderin' the nearest guard ter throw the customer outa the door."

He drew a deep breath and roared on.

"It was my personality that overwhelmed the Widder Wigton. It was my dignity an' my upper class decorum won her confidence. It were my golden words which brung that hundred thousand bucks flyin' outer her reticule ter light in the Bank o' Jezebel. If you had o' bin in there, she would o' took one look at yore dishonest mug an' gone right out an' let the first land shark or gold-mine flimflammer git her fortune. You owe me—"

Cashier Beanpole Stebbins sighed as though giving in to an acute headache, which could be combatted no more. "All right, Union, you Massachusetts miser, you win. But you'll wait till Mr. Samuel Simon comes back and he'll give you the money."

"Have a drink on me!" triumphed Union. "A Connecticut Yankee, bein' born that way, has tried to befoozle a Commonwealth o' Massachusetts biznessman outer just money due him an' failed, as usual. Fer you, Beanpole, I feel only the kindest emotions o' contempt mixed with pity. We be the best o' friends an' feller-workers agin. Now that bizness is settled, who in heck was it tried ter shoot me?"

"That is a deep-dyed mystery, Union," contributed Push-'em-Up. "Who would you suspicion?"

Union scratched his bald dome reflectively. "I owe money ter about everybody in town, Push-'em-Up, an' dead men not only do not tell no tales but they do not pay up nobody unless they happen ter leave an estate which I most celebratedly ain't got. So it should not of bin a reg'lar citizen. The Widder Wigton she said it might be some sinner's tribute ter her but she be jest arrived in town."

"Yestidday by the independent stage from the north," said Push-'em-Up. "So the hostler from the stage barn told me a while ago. Those three widders come in together with some other tough-looking strangers and they have all moved into rooms in the London House and have fixed up meeting-quarters in that old lunchroom away up Silver Street what failed. They would appear to be some kind of organized band, Union, and no organized band ever brung Jezebel nothing but a new wave of trouble, yet. Those formidable widders may have been scouting this joint over their sarsaparillas. Lookit those secret weapons that you say they carry."

"Push-'em-Up, you be a prey ter a low, suspicious nature," snorted Union. "So be I, but leddies be leddies an' they must be treated as sech on the frontier. Them formidable widders was prob'ly jest lookin' over this bucket o' blood ter see if they was enny matrimonial prospects floatin' around in it. Them weapons I told you of, they got a right ter carry on the frontier, if they prefer 'em ter the traditional widder's steel knittin' needles, which also kin be a powerful persuader ter a victim which be tryin' ter back away from the altar."

He lifted his head in a listening attitude. "Have I gone loco or be there a circus in Jezebel? I hear the boomin' an' the tootin' of a band."

MUFFLED by distance, but coming closer every second, sounded the deep thudding and the loud and brassy notes of musical instruments traveling along Silver Street.

Shouts were beginning and the various noises that indicated something new had arrived in Jezebel and that the citizens were crowding out onto the boardwalks to view it. Union shouldered his way through the press and onto the porch staring eastward.

The big drum boomed, the cymbals clashed, loudly the cornets blew. And then Union sighted the strange procession that marched the desert sand in the flaring sunset. At its head strode the small figure of the Widow Wigton, in rusty black, brandishing a hatchet. Behind her walked abreast the two formidable widows — Sister O'Brien and Sister Schmidt—also clutching hatchets. A man with a bass drum, cymbals fastened to its top, followed, alternately pounding with drumstick and banging with cymbals; and after him came a pair of cornetists, puffing valiantly. Two more men as a rearguard bore a white banner with gold lettering.

There was determination, mixed with conscious rectitude, in every bearing but the faces of the men were strangely seamed and tough. The voices of the band, male and female alike, rose in chant:

"We shall gather at the river,
We shall gather at the river. . . ."

"Salvationists!" gasped Union. "No, they be no Salvationists, they be somethin' else the Widder Wigton has thought up! I kin see the letterin' on the banner now—'Ladies Loyal Legion'. Good gorrymighty, a gang o' reformers has hit Jezebel, armed ter the teeth!"

Onward marched the Widow Wigton. Gone was all the surface of sweetness from her bonnet-framed face. She glared from right to left, her small jaw was set like granite, the light of fanaticism gleamed in her eyes. It gleamed equally in the eyes of muscular Sister O'Brien and the vast Sister Schmidt. This was a militant crew and the Widow Wigton was a woman transformed. The parade came abreast of the Arizona Palace, swerved and marched straight for its swinging door. Aloft the Widow Wigton waved her weapon, high and shrill rose her voice.

"Down with the demon rum! Down with the devil's pasteboards! Forward, loyal comrades!"

The startled crowd gave way before her and Union found himself carried back into the Arizona Palace. Through the swinging doors stalked the strange parade and the Widow Wigton stopped. An awed silence had fallen on the bar and the gambling tables, every face was turned to the intruders.

"Do you know who I am, and why I have come to Jezebel?" cried the small, rusty-black clad widow. "I—I am Harriet Wigton, known far and wide as Hatchet Hattie the sworn foe of all vice! I have come, Jezebel, to do you good!"

"Migaw!" It was the perspiring, thicket-bearded Bushface Biggs, standing next to Union, who gulped. "Hatchet Hattie, the Kansas Tornado! The ravin', reformin' hellion which has smashed up hundreds o' bars! She smashed up my brother-in-law's bar back thar in Wichita, Kansas, six months ago; an' I had ter send him a thousand dollars ter go back inter bizness with. Hatchet Hattie in Jezzeybell ter do us good!"

"I have heard o' her!" gulped Union. "Who ain't—west o' the Mississippi? But I never knew her last name." He mustered a deep breath as though about to step into a hail of bullets and moved forward. "Missus Wigton—"

"Stand aside, Banker Jones. Just what are you doing in this den of iniquity? You, victims of the devil's pasteboards!" Her hatchet waved, taking in the faro crowd and poker players. "Cease your descent into Gehenna! You!" She pointed the hammer claw at Push-'em-Up behind the bar. "Servant of Satan, purveyor of poison, asp and viper! Halt your sinful labor!"

For a moment there was not a sound in the Arizona Palace. Then a lusty roar of laughter rose from scores of throats. Hatchet Hattie Wigton's small face flamed with fury. Behind her like a wall loomed the two big widows.

"You laugh at us! Others of your unregenerate ilk have laughed at us. It is the noble work of reform that we carry on. My husband died of drink, the husbands of Sister O'Brien and Sister Schmidt died of drink."

"Mebbe they was druv ter it," commented an unsympathetic voice.

"These loyal men comrades are reformed drunkards all. We have dedicated our lives to the task of wiping out the devil's sources of supply. We do good in our own militant

way, the way of the crusader! Comrades!" At Hatchet Hattie's gesture the seamy-faced men lined up against the wall and the drumstick and the cornets poised. "Our battle hymn, with which we swept all Kansas!"

The music rose under the low ceiling. The drummer and the pair of men holding the Ladies Loyal Legion banner lifted their voices in hoarse, inspired chant.

"Brighten the corner where you are,
Brighten the corner where you are—"

"Forward, sisters, to the fray!" screeched Hatchet Hattie and dove for the corner of the bar where it had been cut out to permit the passage of waiters bearing drinks. She plunged through the opening and in back of the mahogany like an avenging angel. At the same time, Sisters O'Brien and Schmidt charged for the gambling tables. Down upon Push-'em-Up Hatchet Hattie bore and instinctively he reached for his beer maul.

"Viper! Asp! Recreant sinner! Would you lay a hand on an American woman!"

"Git away!" howled Push-'em-Up in agony, retreating and dropping the maul. "Get away you gosh awful female!"

He fled, panting, for the other end of the bar and vaulted over it to safety. Crashing, rending, the hatchet swung as the Kansas Tornado ploughed it down the rows of bottles beneath the mirror. In fragments they dissolved and a redolent river of redeye splashed onto the floor. The sound of splintering erupted from the center of the room where the hatchets of Sister O'Brien and Schmidt made kindling of the faro and poker layouts. Chips and customers scattered in every direction. Still the drum and the cymbals banged triumphantly, the cornets tooted and the voices chanted.

"Brighten the corner where you are,
Brighten the corner where you are—"

"Thus do we strike at the root of all evil!" Embattled, Hatchet Hattie stood behind the barricade of the bar, brandishing her weapon as though it were a tomahawk. Ruin and destruction lay about her, the back counter dripped from end to end. "Thus, do we wage the war of righteousness! Thus do we bring good to Jezebel, the corrupt! Ladies, you may cease your endeavors for the time being. This den of iniquity has learned its lesson—as shall this entire town!"

Sisters O'Brien and Schmidt stood back, breathing stentorously under their straight fronts. Half a dozen faro and poker tables would never be the same again. The battle hymn ended.

"Lookit my stock!" moaned Push-'em-Up, huddled beside Union. "Lookit all that lovely tanglefoot and health-giving redeye! I feel like my own heart's blood was dripping on the floor."

"Come out from behind, Banker Jones," ordered Hatchet Hattie. "You sneaking asp in the grass! It would be a service to mankind were I to brain you with this hatchet, you lackey of Satan!"

"You are goin' to brain nobody, lady," said a firm and purposeful voice. The batwing doors were still swinging to the unexpected entrance of Sheriff Lew Barton, whose aptitude in turning up just when he was needed was proverbial in Jezebel. Compactly built and tawny-mustached, he was a frontier peace officer of desperately cool courage and lightning judgment. "Just what has been goin' on here?"

Thunderously the customers informed him.

"Hatchet Hattie, the Kansas Tornado, wrecked the dump!"

"Her female hellions knocked three hundred dollars' wuth o' my chips onto the floor an' busted up the table when I had an aces full."

"The Arizony Palace has bin attacked by wuss than Apaches!"

"So you are Hatchet Hattie?" said Sheriff Lew. "Your reputation has traveled ahead of you. I reckon most of Jezebel has heard of you, more or less. You'll be in court for disturbin' the peace, you and your two female allies, the first thing tomorrow. In the meantime, consider yourselves under arrest. Gimme that hatchet, Hattie."

"Come and get it, you minion! You ally of the liquor interests!" screeched Hatchet Hattie and slammed her weapon through the wreckage of the counter, knocking its debris to the floor. "What do I care for your puppet courts, your corrupt judiciary, when I am fighting the battle of reform? Do you dare to jail an American widow who has one hundred thousand dollars in your Bank of Jezebel?"

"What?" inquired Sheriff Lew as a gasp of amazement traveled the Arizona Palace.

"Ask Mister Jedediah Jones there, the president of the Bank of Jezebel."

"Union Jones the president of the Bank of Jezebel! That's—" commenced Sheriff Lew.

Union moved forward and the contortion of his blazing face was awesome. A series of portentous winks accompanied it.

"Sheriff Lew," he husked, the words screened by the gust of laughter that suddenly shook the premises, "she thinks I am. Let her go on thinkin'."

"Get that hatchet away from her and I will back you up," said Sheriff Lew. "I cannot whack a widow lady over the head with a six-gun barrel or lock her up in a calaboose that is filled with cockroaches and Mexicans with the DTs and yellin' cowboys, if there is any other way to handle her. You git that hatchet and you can be the Shah of Persia for all I care. You fail to git that hatchet and I will have to lock her up and the judge will order her outer town with her friends."

"Takin' her hundred thousand with her!" moaned Union. "Good-bye one thousand bucks! Sheriff Lew, I shall lay myself as a sacrifice on the altar o' Jezebel's peace."

"Come and get my hatchet!" the Widow Wigton went on taunting. "I will bend it over your skull! No Kansas sheriff ever got my hatchet away from me without a hospital bed along with it!"

"Gaw!" breathed a lantern-jawed customer. "She has got Sheriff Lew buffaloed! She has treed the hull Arizony Palace! An' she will go on an' tree the hull o' Jezebel! Thar is no one dares ter face her. No gentleman kin hit a widder lady."

"Ruint!" panted Push-'em-Up. "Jezebel is ruint! No, you cannot nestle a blunt instrument against a leddy's bonnet or pacify her with a slug of lead in the stummick. It would desecrate American womanhood. We have got us a raging lioness loose. Union, where are you going?"

"Inter the lioness' mouth," said Union. He threw back his shoulders, shot his cuffs and ran a finger around the stiff edge of his collar. With a tread that was practically firm he marched straight for Hatchet Hattie. "Missus Wigton," he said, "in the name o' the better element o' Jezebel, which I represent, I ask you—gimme that hatchet. You are a woman of high-spirited temper an' I am sure the jedge will overlook yore well-meanin' activities outside of a small fine an' payin' fer the damages ter the spirituous stock o' the Arizony Palace. We welcome you an' wish ter keep you in our midst. Pussonally—" he breathed deeply and took the plunge, "I regard you as a most admirable woman. P'raps," he dove deeper, "the most admirable woman I have ever met. I should be grieved ter see you yammerin' behind the bars o' the calaboose along with the cockroaches and the DT Mexicans an' the ill-advised cowboys."

A strange look came into the flaring eyes behind the steel-rimmed spectacles. They soften, they become docile. Hatchet Hattie held out her weapon, butt first.

"I shall always listen to you, Banker Jones," she said. "Ladies, give your hatchets to Banker Jones, my good friend and the supporter of reform."

"Banker Jones, the supporter of reform!" rose the howl from the crowd. "That be gigantical! Union Jones, the red-nosed ole——"

"Shut up, you!" ordered Sheriff Lew. A relieved grin split his tanned face. "What Union Jones says goes, you hear me?"

The howl subsided and a curious murmur took its place but no more voices raised. All Jezebel was aware that when Sheriff Lew gave an order, he knew what it was about. If he said Union Jones was the president of the Bank of Jezebel, then Union Jones was the president of the Bank of Jezebel.

Union gasped incredulously as he felt the weight of the hatchet in his hand. Toward him advanced Sister O'Brien and Sister Schmidt and they were holding out their hatchets while the room gaped.

"I will possess myself of the evidence, President Jones," stated Sheriff Lew. "You sure have got a way with you." Union bundled the three weapons together and shoved them at the law officer who tugged reflectively at his tawny mustache. "Yes, Union, it is plain that you are the one to handle this delicate situation. Hatchet Hattie, and you two other ladies, you are released from arrest. I am paroling you in the custody of President Jones."

"You are—waarrgh—" The tortured roar broke from Union Jones.

"Produce them before Judge Jeffers at his court at ten o'clock tomorrow, Union. In the meantime, you are responsible for their behavior. Good evenin', ladies, I must make my preliminary tour of the Mexican district. Keep your chin up, Union."

Union jerked that facial feature from the sudden slumping position it had assumed. But it fell back again. "Good gorrymighty!" he muttered. "Keeper o' three hellion females, one of 'em conspirin' matrimony with me." He stared at the batwings that had swung to behind Sheriff Lew's figure. "The fightinest sheriff on the hull frontier an' even he don't dare ter face that woman. Nor does ennybody else. All Jezebel be cowerin' behind the trousers o' Union Jones."

"We, too, are departing." Hatchet Hattie moved from behind the bar and motioned to her band. "We shall hold a short meeting in the street with cornet solos and a little talk on our future program of good for Jezebel. Tomorrow afternoon we shall hold a full-length program of music and sermons against vice in a more desirable location. Banker Jones!" Her eyes rayed upon him. "I am sure that you will loan us the use of the Bank of Jezebel's porch as our platform. Its plaza would make an ideal gathering place for an audience."

"Take it, ma'am," said Union hoarsely.

"And so until I see you again, goodnight." Hatchet Hattie started for the door with her tough-looking crew falling in behind her. The seamy-faced musicians, who had been drunkards, seemed to cast strange, longing looks at the wrecked bar. "Goodnight, Jedediah," she added softly.

Union staggered to the bar and clutched at its parapet as though for support. "Redeye, Push-'em-Up. A double shot of Old Merry Panther Screech ter restore my sanity. What have I done ter deserve this fate?"

"It is what you get for living a lie, Union, you old confidence man." Cashier Beanpole Stebbins appeared at his side. "If you had not impressed your false banking personality on Widow Wigton, you would not now have her wrapped about your neck. You will earn your commission by the agony of your mind and the sweat of your fear, I am delighted to say."

"I will still have a thousand bucks!" roared Union. "An' where were you when the hatchets begun ter swing? I have not seen you sincet that woman an' her reform wreckin' crew come through the door. Look-it the chalk all over yore shoulder! You bin hidin' under the billiard table, you Connecticut refugee! You left me all alone ter keep that hundred thousand o' the filthy lucre you worship in the bank's coffers!"

From outside in the street the cornets sounded and voices uplifted in righteous song. Push-'em-Up was coming forward from the rear of the establishment with a dozen bottles under his arms.

"The Arizony Palace is open fer bizness again," he announced. "We have undauntedly summoned up the reserve stock from the storeroom."

The customers rushed joyously to the replenished bar and once again a revivified Arizona Palace rang with conscienceless revelry.

"That Hatchet Hattie mebbe she has larned her lesson in Jezzeybell which she never larned in Kansas," said Bushface Biggs hopefully. "Lissen, she has quit her yowlin' in the street." Outside the music and the chanting had stopped. "I shall report on her from the winder."

"She will learn her lesson in court tomorrow," said Push-'em-Up with firmness. "Even if I have to sit up all night estimating the cost of the damages she has done. You will be amazed at how all the bad accounts on the Arizony Palace's slate are going to creep into the bill, but not even the eye of Judge Jeffers will see them there. Properly handled, them costs should bring the Arizony Palace in a neat profit."

"Hatchet Hattie air gittin' ready ter go home," announced Bushface, looking out of the plate-glass window. "No, she ain't! One of her men comrades which went up the street is back, handin' her a package done up in a noospaper. She is openin' it an' passin' its contents to them widder sisters."

"Battle hymn!" rose the voice of Hatchet Hattie, carrying into the Arizona Palace. The drum banged and the cornets brayed. "Forward once more, comrades, to the fray!"

"Good gaw!" howled Bushface Biggs. "It was extry hatchets in that noospaper! Hatchet Hattie and her crew are chargin' the Mesa Saloon acrost the street!"

A wild shouting burst in the night and the crashing of glassware mingled with the yells of affrighted bartenders and panic-stricken

citizens. Union rushed to the plate-glass window and looked out upon another battle of destruction on the opposite side of the street. Through the Mesa's wide glass frontage he could see the tornado of black bombazine wreaking havoc along the bar and its companion tornadoes shattering the tables of chance. Suddenly the tumult stopped and the black-clad figures rushed out of the door and back into the street, their raid done. Hatchet Hattie lifted her weapon back over her shoulder.

"Sisters, the parting gifts!" The three hatchets spun through the air and went crashing through the plate-glass front. "Home, comrades, we have ended today's stint of good for Jezebel! Sing, comrades, sing our hymn of victory!"

Banging and blowing, the band fell in behind Hatchet Hattie, who strode eastward in the moonlight, a vigorous, invincible figure in rusty weeds with the light of triumph gleaming on her small face.

"The day is done, the battle o'er!
The Demon Vice shall rule no more!"

MUSIC and voices faded far up Silver Street. The customers, miners and townsmen at the Arizona Palace bar shuddered and began to gulp their redeye hastily. "Soon thar will be no more o' this life-supportin' fluid left in Jezzeybell, if this keeps up," volunteered a lugubrious citizen.

"You let her git outer your custody, Union," reproached Push-'em-Up.

"Ter heck with the custody o' that hellion!" foamed Union.

"You have got to keep it, Union," said Beanpole Stebbins firmly. "Or lose your thousand dollars. If Judge Jeffers orders her out of town, out goes her hundred thousand tomorrow, and Mister Samuel Simon will no more pay you your commission than the president of a Hartford Insurance Company would pay a salesman his commission on an order for a policy that was canceled next day."

"No," said Union, his face writhing, "he wouldn't. I shall have ter git my brilliant noospaperman's brain ter work on this."

"Marry her, Union," suggested Push-'em-Up, helpfully. "Didn't you tell us how she made them inflammatory advances to you in the bank? Lookit the sweet and dovelike way in which she said 'goodnight, Jedediah' rightout here in public. Love was dripping from her voice like beer suds from a wrung-out bar towel. Accept her proposal of marriage, Union, and come into possession of your thousand-dollar commission — plus ninety-nine thousand. Think of your old age and make provision for it besides saving Jezebel's likker from total splinteration."

"Marry her, Union!" howled the crowd. "Marry her an' save Jezebel!"

"Marry that woman!" raged Union. "That woman has got a will of iron! Marry her and spend the rest of my life not drinkin' myself to death an' as likely as not bangin' that drum an' yowlin' reform songs in her parades, an' doin' good ter innercent people what never did no harm ter me? I will stick my head inter no lioness' mouth a second time. I shall think my way somehow ter the salvation o' my thousand bucks an' also the salvation o' Jezebel's buckets o' blood. Gimme a quart o' Old Merry Panther Screech, Push-'em-Up, with which ter seek a secluded corner an' cogitate."

He grabbed the bottle and retired into the shadows of the rear wall. The racket of Silver Street penetrated to his hideaway as time went on, but it was a strangely nervous racket as though the citizens of Jezebel were aware that disaster impended and that their way of life was threatened. Union's blazing red face grew purple as a variety of emotions passed across it. Despondency changed to resolution, and resolution to hope.

"The lower gits the contents o' the bottle the higher the hope mounts in the human breast," he confided to the drink-splotched table. "I be gittin' somewhere. My brilliant noospaperman's brain be like ter bust with comin' inspiration! By godfred mighty, I have got it!" He rose and made for the bar. "I git my thousand bucks! An' Hatchet Hattie will never dare lay her dire weapon on a bar in Jezebel again! Push-'em-Up, gimme a double redeye fer a nightcap. I have did my prodijious thinkin'. What time be it?"

PUSH-'EM-UP REGAN surveyed the wild-eyed figure in the black Sunday broadcloth suit that now had cigar ashes and whiskey stains generously distributed over it.

"Two hours have elapsed since you went into conference with President Jones of the

Bank of Jezebel, Union. And you look like you have damn near elapsed, too."

Union grabbed the timber-shod doorkey from his hip pocket and brandished it aloft. "I have did my sooperb cogitatin'. On my way home I shall fill in the last weeny details. I have saved Jezebel! Push-'em-Up, you gimme that littul package I left with you back o' the bar this mornin'."

"Ain't you got enough of a package inside you without you want to carry one home in your hand, Union?" grinned Push-'em-Up, passing the paper-wrapped parcel across the counter.

"Push-'em-Up, goo' night!"

Union dove for the swinging doors, caromed off the right-hand doorpost, found the opening and lurched through onto the moonlit street. Strange guffaws emerged from him as he shouldered valiantly along the boardwalk. Three blocks and he turned into the mouth of an alley that cut through to the street on which Madame Santa Fé's boarding house was located. He went down it with the instinct of a homing pigeon, his gait woodenly stiff and his eyes partially closed.

"Yessir," he muttered raggedly. "Hatchet Hattie be in fer the surprise o' her life half an hour after I git ter the bank an' see that unscrupulous Beanpole Stebbins in the mornin'. She has done her last good ter Jezebel, she has. Gurrf!"

It was half a groan, half an ejaculation of shock that burst from him as he pitched face forward onto the sand. The overalled, slouch-hatted figure that had been following swiftly on his footsteps in the shadows of the alley's sidewalls stood over him, thrusting away the bludgeonlike object that it had crashed down onto his skull, leaping noiselessly and expertly from behind. Union Jones did not move and a rivulet of blood was running down the back of his head.

"President Jones of the Bank of Jezebel," the snarl came, "yer dead as a goat!"

III

ONCE more Union Jones, Jezebel's leading indestructible, marched in full Sunday-suited dignity along the arcades of Silver Street in the brassy glare of the morning sunshine. Down the hard-packed sand of the street itself the usual traffic of mule carts, ore wagons and mounted men passed, but on the sidewalks there was a strange lack of citizenry. No loungers took their ease on the boxes and barrels that lined the storefronts, no group of idlers populated the front porch of the Grand Hotel. Where there were citizens moving they seemed to be going about their business in a hurried manner.

"All Jezebel be up ter the courthouse seein' Hatchet Hattie an' her widder co-hellions brung up before the jedge," remarked Union to the desert air. "Well, I have did my best fer her. I have retained the worst lawyer in Jezebel ter defend her. What a woman! An' what the—"

He stopped in surprise in front of an unrecognizable Arizona Palace. Strong shutters protected its windows, blanketing them completely, and in place of the familiar batwings a solid wooden door with a slit cut in it at the height of a man's eyes confronted him. Across the street the Mesa Saloon had been turned into a similar fort, everywhere Union's glance traveled along Silver Street the oases of liquor had placed themselves in a state of siege.

Union recovered promptly and thundered his fist on the door. A pair of eyes appeared in the slot.

"Open up, Fort Arizony Palace, in the name o' the Continental Congress!"

A heavy bolt shot, the door creaked open, and Push-'em-Up Regan stood revealed with the beer maul in his hand.

"Oh, so it is you, Union. We are taking no chances any more. Slewfoot, take over the door."

"A fine condition of affairs!" snorted Union, making for the bar. "A fine, free America where you gotter be peeked at by the bartender through a hole before you kin git in ter buy a drink. If this state o' things should ever become gineral, America be doomed."

"It is that woman, Union," said Push-'em-Up, back behind the parapet. Half a dozen bottles stood on the bar, which had its normal complement of morning consumers, and the back counter once more gleamed with an imposing array of spirituous goods. "We are all barricaded up against her next onrush if she makes one. There is no telling what she will do after she sees the bill of damages I put in for the Arizony Palace by our attorney up to the court. But—" he added brightly, "mebbe she will not head directly here with

another hatchet. Mebbe she will merely faint."

"She kin git no hatchets or weppings of enny kind, no more," put in Bushface Biggs, who was enjoying a mid-morning breakfast of redeye and rolls. "Every hardware store in town has been warned agin her."

"Push-'em-Up, Bushface, my feller citizens an' gentlemen o' Jezebel, if any!" Union made the pronouncement in the manner of an orator addressing an audience. "No one need never fear agin what that Hattie hellion will lay a hatchet on a Jezebel bar! I have drawn the lioness' claws."

"Huh?" ejaculated Push-'em-Up. His stare of surprise turned to one of lively curiosity as Union drew his hand across his perspiring forehead and removed his felt hat. "Fer gaw sake, who carved their initials on your coconut?"

Union gently touched the network of courtplaster that surmounted his bald cranium.

"I was assassinated agin, Push-'em-Up, on my way home from here last night. That be twicet in the same day I was assassinated. Somebuddy crept up behind me and laid a blackjack on top o' my skull, with the foul intention o' makin' the desert sands run red with my brains."

"And the blow bounced," said Push-'em-Up admiringly.

"Lookit that hat." Union pointed to the split in the top of the GAR black felt slouch that lay on the bar. "The blow druv clean through it onto what was beneath. An' what was beneath happened ter be that littul package I took home with me which contained a dozen stiff collars I bought ter go with my Sunday suit on my way here yestiddy mornin'. I do not like ter dandle littul packages in my hand so I slapped it inter the top o' my hat an' slapped that hat on top o' my head. So the murderin' force o' the blackjack it evaporated on them dozen stiff collars but their edges was druv into my skin somethin' awful. Found I was, completely knocked out, by a late homecomin' gentleman, who fell over me in Tin Can Alley an' brung me to."

"Twice in one day," said Push-'em-Up. "Union, at this rate, you will not be with us much past sunset. Who in hell wants you out of the way?"

"They want the President o' the Bank of Jezebel outa the way, Push-'em-Up. An' I be attendin' ter that matter also. I sent fer Doc Mac McCarty ter patch me up at Madame Santa Fé's an' I also summoned from his slumbers that Cashier Beanpole Stebbins an' I give him a job what kept him up all night. Him an' his hull staff. As a bank president I be most industrious."

Through the door, stealthily admitted by Slewfoot, the guardian of the peephole, a steady trickle of customers had been coming; by now the cheerful rattle of poker chips was sounding and the roulette ball was clicking its way merrily around the ebony bowl. Shouts rose and the Arizona Palace, its spirits damped for the time being, was on its way to another riotous day in its history.

"Double Old Merry Pancher Screech, Push-'em-Up," ordered Union. "It will call fer a powerful amount o' stimulatin' fluid ter pull me through this crisis. Slap it right down in front o' my nostrils." His glance went casually toward the rear of the establishment. "Take it back, Push-'em-Up! Water, water! Here she comes, loose agin!"

Marching determinedly between the tables, straight for the bar, with Sisters O'Brien and Schmidt behind her, advanced Hatchet Hattie, the flare of rage in her eyes. On her shoulder and on the shoulders of her companions rested objects with long handles and broad blades painted a violent red.

"Good gorrymighty, they have got the fire-axes!"

"You can barricade your front portal, if you wish, you viper!" Hatchet Hattie hurled at Push-'em-Up. "You can machinate and you can conspire but it will be to no avail. Your back door was open and so was the door of the firehouse as we passed it."

"The court!" gurgled Union. "The court, ma'am!"

"A fine of a mere twenty dollars for disturbing the peace, Banker Jones. The legal counsel you sent me, Attorney Goodfellow, made a heart-stirring plea in my behalf, in which he likened me to Joan of Arc, and Judge Hoxie was visibly moved. Ten dollars for the incident here, the same for the Mesa."

"Good gorrymighty!" breathed Union. "It were Jedge Hoxie sittin' instid o' Jedge Jeffers an' it be Lent durin' which he totally abstains, an' thinks everybody else should do the same. An' Attorney Goodfellow—he

pulled out his Joan of Arc which he never uses except fer good-lookin' young females which have shot their husbands." He looked at Hatchet Hattie. "Twenty dollars be very reasonable, ma'am, an' I congratulate you. As fer the costs——"

"As for the costs, this viper, this servant of Satan, put in!" Hatchet Hattie's voice rose and the fire-axe rose with it; directed toward Push-'em-Up. "Whiskey estimated at thirty dollars a bottle, gaming tables at two hundred dollars apiece, even the mental anguish and shock of this asp, the bartender set at two hundred and fifty dollars! Judge Hoxie ordered it cut to a mere one hundred and fifty, which I paid by check. So here goes!"

The customers at the bar stampeded like frightened sheep as the fire-axe swung in among the scattering of bottles that decorated the mahogany, crashing them into shreds. Hatchet Hattie drew back the fire-axe and sent it hurtling into the big mirror behind the bar which split into ruin.

"Ma'am, ma'am, stop!" howled Union.

"Another axe, Sister O'Brien!" ordered Hatchet Hattie. "I am going in to do good to Jezebel behind this bar again!"

"Stop!" The rooftree echoed to Union's stentorian shout. "Hatchet Hattie! Widder Wigton! That be yore own property you be aimin' ter destroy! That be yore own property which you have jest knocked the hell out of!"

The lifted axe came down and Hatchet Hattie halted in her rush for the back counter where the scores of bottles were ranked. "My own property, Banker Jones? Jedediah, you are——"

"You have owned the Bank of Jezebel's chattel mortgage o' '$35,000 on the Arizony Palace's huge likker supply an' ornate gamblin' furnishin's since ten o'clock this mornin', Missus Wigton. The likker an' furnishin's be yore security an' there be no better in Jezebel. You own the $20,000 mortgage on the Mesa Saloon's likker, too, and the Crystal Chandeliers $15,000 an' some more. In fact, ma'am, there be hardly a prosperous bucket o' blood in Jezebel of which you do not own a piece."

"Banker Jones! You—you—" Words failed Hatchet Hattie.

"I instructed Cashier Stebbins ter transfer the mortgages from the bank's ownership ter you late last night, ma'am. You remember, I give it as my opinion that yore $100,000 should be safely invested in mortgages, well away from water an' Injuns? Well, it be—safe an' sound an' seven percent return. You signed the authorization fer us ter invest yore funds fer you, ma'am, at our own discretion. So me an' Cashier Stebbins we done so."

The fire-axe fell from Hatchet Hattie's hand. She gasped while a roar of jubilance rang to the roof.

"Give us a drink on the house, Hatchet Hattie!"

"Old Union Jones, he air as smart as a pack rat when he air sober!"

Union stepped forward and picked up the fire-axe. He held out his hand and silently, their mouths wide open, Sister O'Brien and Sister Schmidt handed him theirs. He tossed them over the bar.

"Thar ain't no court or sheriff in Jezebel will stop you from destroyin' yore own property, ma'am," said Union. "You kin spill yore likker in the street an' bust up yore tables inter toothpicks, if so be it suits you. You see, ma'am, I have placed practically the entire likker traffic and gamblin' facilities o' Jezebel in yore power at one fell swoop. Destroy 'em fer a hundred thousand dollars' wuth o' doin' good ter Jezebel at yore own expense, or set back an' draw yoreself a wholesome, gilt-edged seven percent on A-1 security. A likker mortgage be a better asset nor one on land out here on the frontier, ma'am. A man kin do without land, an' moreover, he has no cravin' ter buy land eight, ten, twelve times a day, or order a round o' town lots fer his friends on payday night."

The small figure of Hatchet Hattie seemed to go rigid as steel. She stood staring at Union Jones and the fire in her eyes mounted to a mad intensity. Her small mouth clamped like a trap.

"President Jedediah Jones," she said, and her voice had a note of menace in it. "I shall not go into your loathsome action here in public. I am using your bank porch at three-thirty this afternoon for our meeting. I shall see you alone in your private office at three o'clock exactly. You have fooled me, you have scorned me and you will regret it to your dying day."

In a whirl of bombazine skirts Hatchet Hattie and her co-widows were gone out the

back door. Union stood, running his hand over his forehead.

"Did ya see the look she shot at me, Push-'em-Up?" he asked hoarsely. "Did ya hear what she said? Mebbe my dyin' day it be closer than what I expect."

IV

"THIS," pronounced Union Jones to the decanter of bourbon, "be more nervis-rackin' than waitin' fer the Battle o' Gettysburg ter begin." He poured out a terrific drink. "I musta drunk a hull quart that time. Yellin' Johnny Rebs with bay'nits be appallin' enough but hell hath no fury like a reformin' female in black bombazine which considers herself both befoozled an' bescorned. The Battle o' the Bank o' Jezebel be scheduled ter open at three o'clock, which it be ten minnits of. Warrgh!" The drink sloshed into his beard and he removed his feet from the mahogany in the private office. "Here comes the trumpets o' the enemy, soundin' the charge in the distance."

Far away rose the notes of the cornets and Union's eyes rolled. They came back into focus as an unkempt figure shouldered through the door, advancing with a grin.

"It be only Bushface Biggs an' not the enemy. What kin I do fer you, Bushface?"

"I jest gotta letter," announced Bushface, producing the missive which looked as though it had been chewed open, "from my brother-in-law, which I lent that thousand bucks ter fer to open his saloon in Wichita, after that Hatchet Hattie hit it. He has sent me a bank paper check fer it which I wish ter have cashed, Union." Check and letter fluttered onto the table-top. "I do not see good without my glasses, Union, so will yuh read me his handwritin' that come along with it?"

"Bushface, you uncurried mine mule," said Union, "I do not think you kin read at all or write, except yore name. This be a long screed."

"Then I will go up the street fer a drink while yuh read it," said Bushface. "You kin tell me what it sez when I come back. I do not wish ter be here when that Hatchet Hattie descends and she air on the way now in full marchin' formation. Listen!"

The cornets were going hard and so were the cymbals and Union could visualize the parade advancing relentlessly upon the bank.

"After all, what kin she do?" he muttered. "Beanpole an' I, we was perfectly legal. I would even be illegal fer a thousand bucks."

He assumed a dignified posture, picking up the letter and putting Bushface Biggs' check to one side. It was an excellent picture of a frontier banker that Union Jones presented as the blare of the cornets and the clash of the cymbals reached the bank plaza. "They be nearin' the porch," he calculated. "Now the band it has stopped there. Union Jones, brace yourself!"

He stared at the writing in his hands. Sentences from its opening paragraph leaped at him from the paper. "'. . . Many thanks for the loan, Charley . . . plenty glad to say my testimony helped get that pizen female Hatchet Hattie six months in the county jug. . . . Been there a week now. . . .' Gorry-mighty!" Union stared at the date on the letter. "Mailed two weeks ago! Hatchet Hattie be in the jug in Kansas! Then who in . . ."

He lifted his eyes and stared. He had not heard Hatchet Hattie come in, or the two widows who loomed behind her. The music had stopped and the bandsmen had entered the bank. He could see them at the counter and what he saw was plenty. He lifted his own hands automatically to match those of Cashier Beanpole Stebbins and the clerks outside, who were staring into the muzzles of revolvers. Hatchet Hattie's hand was out of her bag and her small Smith and Wesson covered Union's gullet. Sister O'Brien and Sister Schmidt were covering his stomach with bigger revolvers.

"No, I am not Hatchet Hattie," said the small widow. Her face was the face now of a trained criminal. The faces of her two companions were those of open killers, eyes dilated by drugs. "I never was Hatchet Hattie, but she was an excellent disguise, you red-nosed fool! Would anyone ever suspect a crowd of hatchet-slinging do-gooders of having an eye on your bank, President Jones? And now, President Jones, give me the key to the strong-room, which never leaves your person or your sight. It will save me the trouble of using the duplicate we made."

Union's eyes bulged from his head, his brow was knotted, a hoarse, strangling murmur came from him as he drew the key from

his inner breast pocket, this time, and held it out.

"Keep the old fool covered," ordered the pseudo Hatchet Hattie and, stepping to the Navajo blanket, she swept it back on its rings, baring the strong-room's sheet-iron door. "It was most kind of you to give your latest depositor every information on just how your money is protected, President Jones, you gullible yokel!" A mocking note crept into the small widow's voice. "Your clerks were covered before they could reach for the guns in their desk drawers, your sirens are being smashed, your armed rifle guard is here only at night. Our horses are waiting in the arroyo beyond that mesquite clump, from which you were shot at, with one of our band. And Mexico is fifteen minutes hard gallop away."

"With a posse—"

The widow lifted her head exultantly. Voices were yelling up and down the street in the distance. The clang of an iron triangle, beaten in frenzied strokes, started.

"Fire! Fiyurrr! Mexican Alley! Fiyurrr!"

"Good Gorrymighty!" burst out Union. "Mexican Alley be made o' tinder an' there be a wind!"

"And you have a volunteer fire department," said the widow, lifting the flap of the keyhole and poising the key. "They will go, all Jezebel will go to the fire. There will be no posse gathered after us, President Jones. One of my little band set that fire to draw off all your citizens, armed or otherwise. Ah, yes, our plan is perfect. It is——" She faced around, snarling viciously, with the big key in her hand. "This is not the key to the strong-room, you clown! It is three times too large!"

"No, ma'am," said Union Jones. "The key ter the strong-room be off on a huntin' trip in Mister Samuel Simon's vest pockit. That be a boardin'-house key. It be not the key ter the $500,000 treasure no more than you be Hatchet Hattie. An' I be not the President o' the Bank of Jezebel. I be a printer, who happened ter be settin' around this offis an' figgered I would do a littul wholesome bizness fer the bank fer an honest commission. It be all very confusin'."

The key to Madame Santa Fé's front door dashed to the floor as the ex-Hatchet Hattie's eyes flamed in terrible fury. "Bring in that drum!" she called and from the outer room a bandsman hurried in, carrying the drum as though it were of unusually heavy weight. A knife flashed in Sister O'Brien's hand, the drumhead split apart revealing a collection of steel tools and a thick package strapped under its top. "Go to work!"

Sister O'Brien put the assortment of pincers, clamps, and jimmies on the floor and moved to the strong-room door. Expertly she hitched the drum strap over the curtain rung until the drum hung level with the lock. Her fingers moved at the package and a fuse came out.

"So we blow your door down, after all," said the false Hatchet Hattie. "Outside, everybody."

With Sister Schmidt's revolver in his back and his hands up, Union stumbled into the main office where the three clerks already lay bound and gagged on the floor. Cashier Beanpole Stebbins sat on a chair under leveled bores, cold perspiration dripping from his long nose.

"Union," he moaned, "this is what your cupidity has got us!"

"Back of the desks. Lie down!" ordered the small widow leader as Sister O'Brien shouldered hastily back, closing the door to the private office. Shouts, yells and the excited murmur of a crowd came from far away and through the bank's side windows Union could see the pall of smoke that drifted over the roofs. It would be hours

before anyone of Jezebel's citizens would be drawn away from Mexican Alley's conflagration. He lay obediently on the floor while the erstwhile Hatchet Hattie crouched in the shelter of the desk beside him and the others of her band took cover from the coming blast.

"So you are not the president of the Bank of Jezebel," said the false Hatchet Hattie. "So we tried to get the wrong man. We happened to need a dead president of the Bank of Jezebel, Jedediah Jones."

"But why did you want me fer a dead president? Or are you one o' those people who believe the only good bank president be a dead one?"

"In a frontier town whenever a prominent citizen dies the entire population of the town follows him to the grave the next day, do they not? I saw the funeral of a bank president in Texas not long ago with floral tributes and speeches and encomiums and five hundred hired hacks and an army of foot-marchers and the entire business section closed and deserted. While Jezebel was burying President Jones, and there was not a soul on the streets, we would simply have walked down here and off with the cash. My man who blackjacked you last night took a beeswax impression of that key. Since we failed to get you we fell back on the fire for a diversion."

"So you lured me ter the winder ter roll down the shade an' signaled to yer privit assassin in the mesquite with yer handkerchief?" gurgled Union. "While practically proposin' marriage ter me, you bank-robbin' vampire!"

"Would anyone believe when a wealthy widow is making advances to a bank president that she is trying to kill him?"

"Ma'am, you think deep. The Bank of Jezebel be done fer," said Union dolefully. "The regime o' President Jones, it has wrecked it."

"You occasionally have a brain wave in that bald skull of yours, Jones. Buying those mortgages on the liquor, that stopped Hatchet's Hattie's activities cold. We—"

Crashing, the blast went off in the private office and shook the buildings to its brick foundations. Dust swirled out through the door to the office, blown open by the shock.

"In!" ordered the small widow. "Bring Jones and the cashier."

The group plunged forward into the private office. It was filled with a cloud of alkali dust and sand was strewn on the floor. Slowly the fog cleared and revealed the door of the strong-room hanging ajar with its center around the lock and the lock itself blown into wreckage.

"Get that door off!" ordered the small widow.

Sister O'Brien and Sister Schmidt sprang for the safe-breaking tools on the floor and gripped the door's edge with pincers and clamps. Their backs and shoulders strained under their bombazine as they wrenched violently. The bonnet of Sister O'Brien fell back on her shoulders and a strange, reddish, unduly object fell with it.

"Open!" snarled Sister O'Brien and the ruined sheet-iron door swung outward on its hinges, completely askew. From the space that it had hidden poured a river of sand, it flooded down onto the floor, rising knee-high. Sister O'Brien and Sister Schmidt stood back panting. Strange, balked curses fell from their lips. Banked solidly from floor to ceiling, filling the door to the strong-room, the sandbags were piled in a fortress-like array with the sand streaming from the nearest layer torn by the blast of explosive.

"You damned trickster!" screamed the former Hatchet Hattie, glaring at Union. "What is in that strong-room?"

"Five hundred thousand bucks in the cash boxes, ma'am. Plus yore hundred thousand bucks which you used fer a decoy ter win my confidence. It be all in there under about one hundred an' fifty o' them bags filled with the valuable real estate of Arizony. It took a crew of twenty Injuns under Chiricahua Joe, the local Injun labor leader, most o' last night ter fill them bags an' jam-pack 'em up ter the roof in the strong-room under the direction o' Cashier Stebbins an' his clerks. It will take you an' yore crew from now till hell freezes ter unpile them bags an' git down ter the cash beneath 'em. Explosives won't do you no good. I figger you just ain't got that much time on yore hands."

"Damn you!" volleyed the widow and there was the light of a mad woman in the eyes behind the spectacles.

"I do not necessarily have ter be a gullible yokel, ma'am, because I live in Arizony. Havin' bin ole Horace Greeley's best printer back on the New York *Tribune*, I put my noospaperman's brain ter work after I had bin gorryblasted near assassinated twicet an' it was not difficult fer me ter figger that when the so-called President o' the Bank of Jezebel be assaulted twicet in one day, there be an assault comin' on the bank's treasure. So, after that blackjackin' I called in Cashier

Stebbins an' give him the prodijious idee o' loadin' up the strong-room with Arizony real estate fer a precaution until we could find out jest what was up. Frankly, ma'am, I did not actually suspect you an' yore righteous widders an' reformed drunkards, since we have allus got plenty o' misguided characters hangin' around Jezebel. Ho, ho, here be more confusin' noos! The Widder O'Brien be a man!"

The big figure in black bombazine with the fallen-back bonnet glowered murderously. This was a bullet-headed, crophaired Irishman, wigless and bonnetless, gripping his safe-cracking pincers. Union's eyes lighted.

"Well, it be an ole New Yorker! Mike McGurn, the eminent safeblower, what I seen in Tombs Prison along with Big Otto Muller, also a safecracker, when they was held on suspicion o' burglary an' I was visitin' my printer pal, which cracked a *Herald* compositor over the head with a bottle durin' an argument an' was locked up. You was pointed out ter me in the exercise yard, Mike, an' I never fergit a face I met in jail. This would make the Widder Schmidt Big Otto Muller, okay, both o' Marm Clausen's gang of experts, and this should make you, Widder Wigton."

He bowed politely.

"Marm Clausen o' the Five Points herself, the highly eddicated, cultured leader o' the smartest gang o' safecrackers an' criminals littul old New York ever seed. Marm Clausen, the million-dollar fence an' brains o' the gang, which employed safecrackers, tophand burglars an' sech gifted specialists on an annual salary. You lit out from New York a year ago, Marm Clausen, accordin' to the New York *Tribune,* which I still subscribe ter, right after the Third National was looted of two hundred thousand dollars cash, an' the watchman killed."

"Yes, Jones. I am Marm Clausen. This is what is left of my organization."

"But you was killed in a railroad wreck in Illinois, while the entire copper force o' the East was lookin' fer you—I read a month later. You be dead."

"Yes, Jones, we are officially listed as dead. We were in a rail wreck, and there were many bodies burned and unrecognizable. We managed to get certain of our personal identification effects on some of the bodies and took our start fresh in Kansas. Hatchet Hattie's personality appeared perfect for a big strike far from her haunts. There are no police on our trail any more, Marm Clausen, the bank-breaking fence, and her gang are supposed to be underground. And we mean to stay there. Jones, my smart newspaperman, you are not as smart as you think you are."

"Ma'am?" inquired Union politely.

"You and this long-nosed cashier—" Marm Clausen gestured with her Smith and Wesson barrel toward Beanpole Stebbins—"are the only persons living who know that we escaped. You talk too much, Jones. You have talked yourself into your grave. We are now going to shoot both of you so there will be no resumption of the search for Marm Clausen and her gang. We may have to leave Jezebel empty-handed and even without our own hundred thousand dollars, but it won't be long before we crack another bank. McGurn, Muller — get ready to blow these two!"

Snarling murderously, the two men in widow's weeds moved forward. They might be ludicrous figures in their black bombazine but there was nothing ludicrous in the revolver muzzles that covered Union and Beanpole Stebbins. They meant death in seconds.

"Union!" groaned Beanpole Stebbins, his nose dripping even more violently. "You are a hell of a bank president!"

Union began to shudder. "Marm," he said, "Marm Clausen, as a one-time New Yorker, which used ter room in the Five Points section myself, makin' me a neighbor o' yores you might say, kin I have the favor of a last drink before the firin' squad?" He pointed to the decanter.

"Go ahead."

The decanter neck rattled against the glass as Union manipulated it. He stood with the brimming tumbler held shoulder-high. "Push-'em-Up!" he breathed. "Push-'em-Up, where be you?" His hand commenced to shake worse than ever and the liquor slopped over the rim of the glass. "If you would kindly allow an old neighbor ter say a few partin' words an' write a letter or so—"

"Get on with your drink!" rasped Marm Clausen, her tone deadly. There was no mercy in the small, criminal face framed in the black bonnet. "Stop stalling for time. We have an appointment in Mexico."

She glanced suddenly at the nearest open window. The low clear blast of the whistle had traveled from somewhere outside. Her eyes narrowed.

"The horses! Our horses in the arroyo! They are out there on the desert, running riderless, a mile away! Something has scattered them! Jones! By God!" Marm Clausen's voice rose, shrill and terrible. "You have something up your sleeve still! Mow him down, boys!"

"Dive, Beanpole! Dive!"

Marm Clausen's Smith and Wesson rose to cover Union's heart and the other revolvers rose also. Marm Clausen's finger curled on the trigger, tightening in the lethal squeeze. Union's hand swept out and the full contents of his glass of whiskey dashed into the spectacled face. Marm Clausen reeled. The bullet, spitting from the revolver's muzzle, tore the side of Union's coat as he dove frenziedly under the mahogany table. Two more bullets struck the table's edge with his plunge.

"Get them!" shrieked Marm Clausen, spectacles fogged by the dripping liquid. "Shoot! Boys, Shoot!"

The office roared and rocked with gunfire. It seemed to be coming from all directions.

"Drop those guns!" shouted a cool, determined voice from the window. McGurn and Muller turned, firing fast at both the windows. Across the sills jutted the muzzles of Winchesters and Colts. They flamed, lead slashed. "Make your fight then!" rose Sheriff Lew's voice above the tumult of gunfire.

McGurn and Muller made it, emptying their weapons and standing in their tracks, drug-dilated eyes blazing, while bullets struck them and struck them again. Then they went down, pitching onto their faces, and the battle was over. Against the wall, hands empty and high, stood the rest of Marm Clausen's seamy-faced crew, two of them wounded and all their fight gone. Over the window-sills vaulted Sheriff Lew and half-a-dozen men.

"Just about right, Union," said Sheriff Lew.

Union emerged on hands and knees and got to his feet. "Thar be plenty o' times I have been under the table before," he remarked, "but this be the first time a table has saved my life. Come on out, Beanpole. Which one o' them desk drawers be you a-hidin' in?"

From the cramped space under Samuel Simon's many-drawered working desk Beanpole Stebbins crawled. Steel began to clash as handcuffs went on, and Marm Clausen, spectacles clear again, stood attached to a deputy, glaring at Union.

"Ma'am," said Union, shooting his stiff cuffs elegantly, "you are correct. I had something up my sleeves besides these starched furnishin's. That whistle was Push-'em-Up Regan, out in the mesquite clump with Slewfoot Lum an' a coupla Winchesters an' a spyglass. It were Push-'em-Up who opined most sagaciously after you left the Arizony Palace this mornin' that the assassinators after me might be you an' yore gang, on account o' you bein' the only folk in Jezebel which thought I was the president o' the bank. So he volunteered ter sit watch out in that clump, claimin' it would be a pussonal pleasure as an asp an' viper ter sting you at two hundred yards with a Winchester if you was the foul play artists an' tried fer the bank. You ask me, he knocked off an' gagged yore helper long ago an' stampeded yore hosses in the arroyo, after sendin' Slewfoot fer Sheriff Lew. I bin under guard here all along."

"Slewfoot got me at the fire," said Sheriff Lew. "All my deputies were there naturally. We were under those windows for a full minute gettin' yore full admissions, ma'am, before we put in our ante. This bank is damn well surrounded by now. But the job is done. Pete, Jim!" The deputies nodded.

"Get those bodies out of here. Prisoners, you are comin' along to the calaboose. And you are comin', too, this time, Ma'am Clausen. This is an occasion on which a sheriff can lay a hand on a lady, which I did not feel free to do when you were Hatchet Hattie. Don't worry that you will enjoy the hospitality of Jezebel's adobe very long. The East wants you a lot more than the Territory of Arizona, and for a longer time."

Marm Clausen straightened her small and wiry figure. She was a tough, unscrupulous fence, and the brains of a gang, lawless to the core, but there was no fear in her. A queer smile twisted her lips.

"You were a good president, Jedediah Jones," she said. "I have never seen a better performance on any New York stage. Per-

haps, if we had met earlier, the two of us could have gone far. At least, I have been taken in by a New Yorker, and not by some frontier farmer."

"Git goin'!" said Sheriff Lew and the procession of deputies, prisoners and townsmen moved out of the office for the plaza and the street. Union stared at Cashier Beanpole Stebbins across the shambles of what had been one of the most luxuriously appointed bank president's offices on the frontier. Sand strewed its expensive rug inches deep, the sheet-iron strong-room door hung drunkenly from its hinges, broken glass from shot-out windows and various debris littered it.

"Ar-humph!" coughed Union, and sat down carefully in the swivel chair at the table. Untouched by gunfire, the decanter still stood on its tray with an empty glass beside it. He remedied the vacancy and lifted the glass to his beard and his feet back onto the table at the same time. "I shall now issue my last order as president o' the Bank of Jezebel, o'er the shell-torn ramparts o' which you an' I, Beanpole, be still gallantly streamin'. Casher Dewberry Stebbins, git the dustpan an' whisk-broom an' clean up this sand. After which you kin remove the lead from the walls, transfer them likker mortgages we sold Hatchet Hattie back ter the possession o' this institution, an' resume the ordinary routine o' bankin' bizness. I am pussonly through with the bankin' bizness myself, no matter how damn good I was at it. Like old Gineral Sherman, with whom I fit an' from whom I larned my strategy, if nominated president, I shall not run, if elected, I shall not serve."

"Union Jones," twanged Cashier Dewberry Stebbins vigorously, "you go to hell!"

"Tut, tut," remarked Union with complete amiability. He pilfered a cigar, lit it, and sent an aromatic cloud for the ceiling. "It was wuth it fer one thousand dollars."

"You think you get that one thousand dollars out of Marm Clausen's deposit?" demanded Beanpole. "That was stolen money which is not a legal deposit. That belonged to the Third National Bank of New York Marm Clausen's gang looted, you will find out. Those thousand-buck bills numbers were in a straight series, which will be simple to trace."

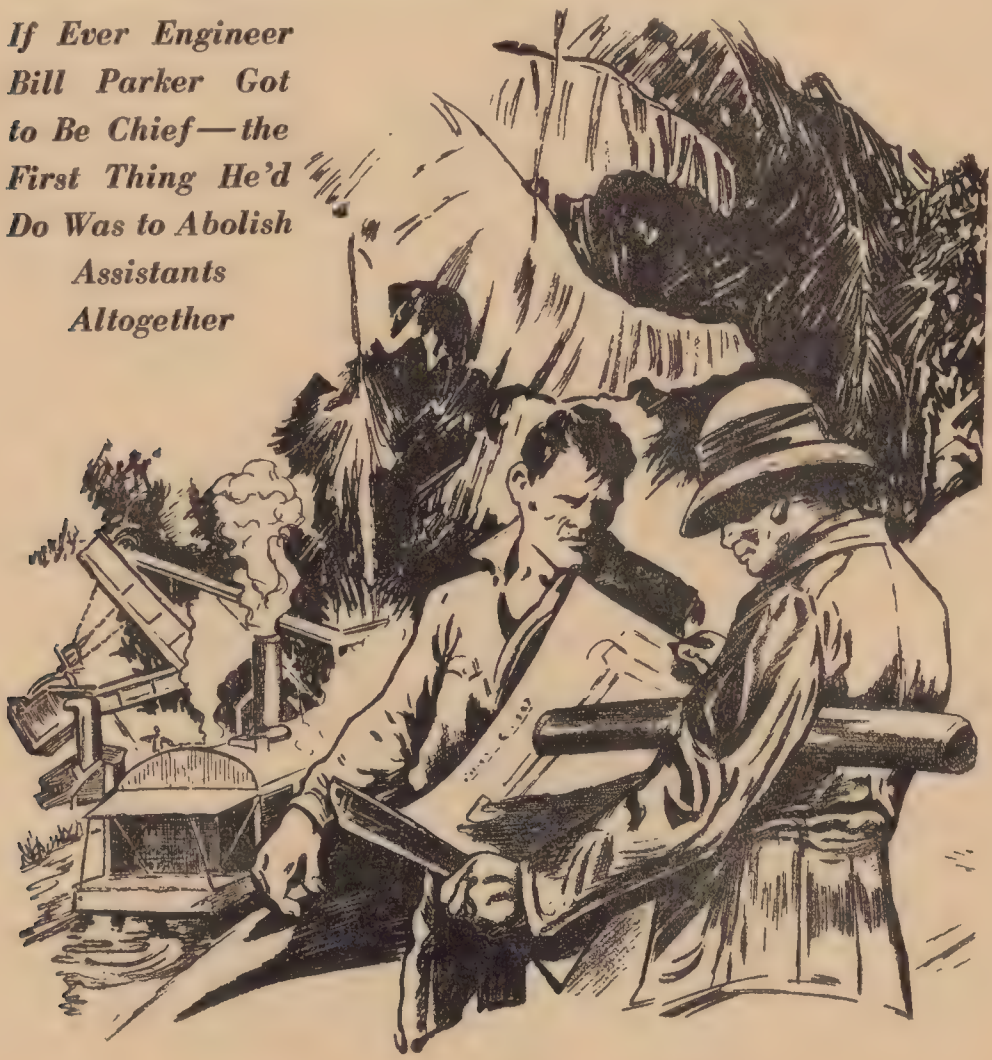
"Huh?" yelled Union.

"All those big New York banks are insured against robbery by the Hartford Insurance companies, one of which long ago would have paid the Third National's loss, so it gets the one hundred thousand for a refund. D'you think a Hartford bank insurance company gives away money? They will send you a case of nutmegs or a small tub of maple sugar, Union, for cutting their loss by one hundred thousand dollars."

"I act as the president o' the Bank of Jezebel, an' I get myself damn' near killed three times, all fer nuthin'? I round up Marm Clausen an' her co-hellions an' her loot, an' I git nuthin? Good gorrymighty, I bin robbed!" The anguished howl rose to the ceiling. "Beanpole, Beanpole! I ain't even ever goin' ter know now whether the hull o' Jezebel woulda turned out ter foller my funeral ter Boot Hill, spreadin' floral tributes an' speeches an' encomiums an' hired hacks all over my assassinated remains!"

Dirt-and-Steel Man

If Ever Engineer Bill Parker Got to Be Chief—the First Thing He'd Do Was to Abolish Assistants Altogether



I

A BRAKEMAN walked through the day-coach.

"Lone Oak! Lone Oak's the next stop! Lone Oak!"

Parker had been dozing in his seat, and the brakeman's bellow aroused him. He was wallowing in the lees of a brief and wholly unsatisfactory sojourn in Memphis, and good wasn't how he was feeling.

He wasn't feeling so bad, though, that he failed to note, as he got his suitcase down, that the slim girl with the seductive legs, red-gold hair, and eyes that were more than just kissing-kin to emeralds, was getting her things together.

She was getting off at Lone Oak. Some timber tycoon's daughter or secretary or something, judging by her smart get-up, and one honey of a looker even by his own standards. Well, he wouldn't be in Lone Oak any longer than it took him to board a launch and beat it up-river to his job of railroad building, so nuts to the blond honey. Nuts to all honeys, starting from now, whatever their hue!

By EDWARD PARRISH WARE

He'd left a blond honey behind him in Memphis, and he savagely hoped she was right then feeling as punk as he was. But she probably wasn't, the selfish, unfeeling, two-timing, double-crossing, egotistical little hypocrite!

After the bust-up, he'd gone in a big way on the town.

But to be honest about it, hadn't he been nursing a yen, after six unrelieved months in the stinking swamp, to do just that? Hadn't he wanted a chance to blow in some of the folding money that was burning his pockets? To drink out of clean, shiny glasses set up on bars of polished mahogany, while softly toned feminine chatter and gay laughter pleasantly seduced him? And hadn't he been handed a good excuse for doing it?

Well then—why the gripe?

Principally because of Radley. If only he had had enough jack to oil the bearings on the Memphian carrousel and keep it going on a non-stop throttle forever, or at least a sizable chunk out of forever, he'd right then be rid of Radley.

Chief Radley! Assistant Chief Parker!

Plenty to gripe about. Assistant construction chiefs always have plenty. Who does the hard work on a construction job—the

chief? Hell, no! The assistant. Who gets the big checks—the assistant? Hell, no! The chief.

Five years before, Bill Parker had tackled his first big construction-engineering job. He had gone into the swamps—jungles the natives called them—of northeastern Arkansas as assistant on a drainage project for Stanley Brothers. He had taken into the jungle with him his transit, a pet level, two books of reference relating to his profession, the plays of Shakespeare in one volume—and a full set of ideals, rose-tinted.

Five years had sweated away. Parker still had his transit, his pet level, no longer needed the reference books and knew the plays of Shakespeare by heart. Somewhere beneath mountains of dirt, countless tons of steel and scads of miscellaneous debris, reposed a set of ideals, no longer rose-tinted.

What business had a dirt-and-steel man with ideals?

Radley wouldn't know an ideal if one walked right up and socked him. Radley had never in his life suffered from ideal-troubles, because he'd never had any to go with. He'd had gab, push, influence in high places—and enough engineering savvy to read a blueprint. Read it, and then not know what the hell to do with it!

That was where Bill Parker, assistant, came in. Bill Parker savvied blueprints and could build a job from them. Bill Parker didn't need any assistant. If ever Bill Parker got to be a Chief he'd abolish assistants altogether!

Damn right!" Bill Parker applauded Bill Parker, as he handed his suitcase to a river-rat and told him where to take it.

Across a bridge-like structure connecting the station platform with the fronts of half a dozen frame shacks set on stilts, the early-evening lights of Tom Potter's drink-shop twinkled an invitation. He walked into Tom's place and deposited his elbows on the bar.

Tom himself was back of the bar. He nodded howdy to the engineer, took bottle and glasses from the back-bar and shuffled up in front of him.

"Time you was showing up, Bill," he said, pouring from the bottle. "Reckon you got all them telegrams they been sending you?"

"A bust head's all I got, Tom," Parker told him, eying the filled glass sourly. "What telegrams?"

Tom halted his own glass halfway up. "You mean you ain't heard about Radley?" he asked surprisedly.

"What about him?" Parker, having decided he might hold the drink if he was careful, downed it, shivered, and hastily put away the empty glass.

Then Tom Potter touched off the giant-powder.

"Nothing much," he replied. "Not much they could find of him. He got blowed to hell and gone yestiddy!"

FOR the space of one shallow breath, Parker thought the explosion had been inside his aching head. Then he knew it hadn't. This was serious. What Tom had just told him was mighty serious!

"Hadn't heard about it," he said, feeling the lifesaver snapping him up. "What about it? Any particulars?"

"A few. Nobody seems to know much, except the fact that Radley was blowed plumb up. Scattered. Dynamite under a trestlehead, or something. Anyhow, this dynamite hadn't no business being there. That's what Hank Stanley says. Radley and Bob Jelks, your timekeeper, was standing on the part that blowed up. Got 'em both. That's all, Bill, except Stanley has been burning up Western Union ever since, trying to dig you out of some Memphis grog-shop or other. Probably on Front or Beale, I told 'em," he ended with a buck-tooth grin.

"Shotgun Avenue and Short Third," automatically, as Parker shook his head in refusal of another drink, turned and hurried out.

A hundred yards westward, where the elevated sidewalk ended, was the St. Francis River, with the riding-lights of river-craft spaced along the shore.

Parker went along the walk, down the stair-steps and hailed *The Bouncer,* waiting to run him up-river to the jungle and Ten-Ark's unfinished railroad. He crossed the brief gangplank, greeted Ham-and-eggs Folsom, captain and crew, and went to the cabin amidships. The cabin was lighted, his suitcase lay on its side on one of the long, cushioned benches ranging the walls, and two nifty brown bags were beside it.

The owner of the brown bags, the girl with the seductive legs, was sitting across the gangway from them!

The girl looked up, nodded and asked:

"Are you Mr. Parker, whom we have been waiting for?"

Parker nodded yes. "But I didn't know you would be waiting," he told her, stressing the you. "Would it be too curious if I should ask how come?"

She smiled—and the smile scored one-hundred plus. "I'm Eve Barry," she said, and let it go at that. Obviously, Parker should know about her. He didn't.

"Saw you get off the train," he told her, sitting down where he could look at her better. "Never dreamed, of course, that we would be fellow passengers—"

A HEAVY body descended upon the foredeck, swaying the boat as though a gale had struck it, and Gabe Hatfield, tall, rawboned and pleasantly ugly, came into the cabin. He had to stoop to do it. His still, blue eyes investigated the two passengers without appearing to move in their sockets. He nodded to the girl, then let his glance settle on Parker.

"Hawdy, Parker," he said. "See you got back."

"Howdy, Sheriff," the engineer returned. "What's on your mind?"

"You have been," the Poinsette County Law told him, the eyes chiseling. "Still on it, for that matter. You're kinda off schedule, ain't you?"

Parker's eyebrows went up. "Am I?" he asked. "Who was telling you?"

"Hank Stanley was looking for you back on the job day before yestiddy," Sheriff Hatfield stated. "How come you didn't get back?"

Parker had long ago been innoculated against resenting the prying curiosity inherent in the jungle-jack. Or jill. But he happened to be off his feed, and worried over what Potter had told him. Hatfield's question irritated him.

"How come that to be your business?" he demanded. "Am I drawing pay from Poinsette County?"

"Nope. Poinsette is kind of particular about who it pays out money to."

Parker got up, his red-rimmed eyes hot. The sheriff taped about six-feet-two, but Parker was going to spot him a couple of inches.

"Say what's in your mind, Hatfield!" he warned. "If I don't like it I know what I can do—and I'll do it!"

"Shut up, Parker," the sheriff ordered, not raising his voice. He was neither scared nor angered. "Two men got blowed up by dynamite yestiddy," he went on calmly, "and where that dynamite was when it exploded was where it hadn't any business to be—"

"Of course it hadn't!" Parker interrupted. "If Potter gave me the right of it, it was under a trestle abutment, and it couldn't have been there legitimately. So what?"

"So it was planted there. Somebody planned to blow up that abutment, and blow somebody up with it." He paused and narrowed his eyelids as though considering a point. His voice had not been warm before, and it got colder. He resumed. "If you'd of got back when you was supposed to, you'd have been inspecting them abutments. You'd probably have got blowed up instead of Radley. Yeah, it might have been you that got it—saving you wasn't there to get it. Your good luck."

Parker had no reply to that. What the sheriff had said might have truth in it. Inspection of the concrete trestle-abutments had been on the agenda for yesterday morning. He'd have done it.

"Luck is one way of looking at it," the sheriff's voice edged on. "But not the only way. You wouldn't, now, have planned it on purpose not to be on the job yestiddy morning? You wouldn't have no good reason for that—or would you? That's how come me to ask the question that fired you all up. I asked you how come you didn't show up when you was expected—and I want to hear your answer."

Parker sat down again, but not of his volition. More like the sheriff's words and their obvious implication had shoved him back onto the seat.

"All right, Hatfield," he said. "I didn't get back on schedule because I was too cockeyed to make it. I was stewed to my eyelashes until I got out of a Turkish-bath this morning. Proof? Any number of bartenders, to say nothing of a few women. You wanted an answer. You've got it."

He remembered the red-gold girl, shot a

glance across to her—and wished to hell he'd left out the women.

"I ain't asked you for no alibi—yet," the sheriff remarked chillingly. "But when and if I do, the one you just offered won't hold water!"

Sheriff Hatfield, apparently having had his say, turned and walked out.

II

"WHY won't your alibi hold water?" Parker, involved in complex mental activities, was startled. A quarter of the twenty-eight-mile trip up the bankless, crystal-clear, crooked river had been negotiated in silence. Now the girl had come through with a question. One having a plumb-bob directness. And Parker hadn't a good answer.

"Mental processes in the human kind are devious at best, and a lot worse than that in the pre-human," he advised, still feeling his sheriff-aroused resentment. "That pre-human specimen of recent memory came aboard, said a few words, departed. I know what he said, but don't know what he was thinking—and he probably doesn't either. In any case," with a sudden grin which defined the exact point at which his humor took a turn for the better, "I don't feel any handcuffs around my wrists yet!"

She smiled, and he crossed to sit beside her. Apparently, Miss Eve Barry didn't hold his frank confession of having come fresh from sin against him. She hadn't smiled at him as though she was off him at all, or afraid of him, even though he had practically been accused of committing a double-murder. Maybe this girl was regular. Maybe she wasn't a selfish, hypocritical—

"When I told you my name," she was recalling, "I could see that it meant nothing to you. I thought you might have heard Mr. Hank Stanley mention it?"

"Not that I remember," he confessed, adding quickly, "And it's such a swell name, I'm sure, I'd not have forgotten it. So you're Stanley kinfolks, eh? Fine! And you've come for a nice, long visit?" hopefully.

"I'm not Stanley kin," she denied. "And I don't know how long my stay will be—"

"The longer, the better!" he interrupted with understandable enthusiasm. "That's one of the things wrong about this blasted country. No feminine contacts, except, of course, junglejills. They're monotonous, to put it mildly—besides, there's always a junglejack to look out for. They're dumb, but dangerous."

"Pre-human, like that sheriff?" she laughed.

"Now we get back to the sheriff, do we?" ruefully. "Okay. Here's how it is. Hatfield has no terrors for me. I'm as puzzled about how that dynamite came to be around as he could possibly be. We have had very little need for dynamite on this job. You don't, you know, where there's nothing but swamp. No rock to blast. Trees and stumps in the right-of-way have to be blown, and that's about all. No explosive was used in connection with those abutments—so dynamite had no business there.

"Now—dynamite doesn't explode without assistance. Somebody must embed a cap, insert a powder-fuse and then light the free end of it, else hook up direct with a detonating battery. Dynamite by its lone self is less harmful than stick-candy. Less harmful, because one can get a right poisonous stomach-upset from stick-candy. So, Miss Barry, if dynamite was exploded under that trestle-abutment, then it was feloniously placed there and purposely exploded. I wasn't there. Ergo, I could have had nothing to do with it. Class in explosives dismissed!"

"Barring the possibility of remote-control," Miss Barry agreed, "you simply coudn't have done it. And thanks," slyly, "for the dope on how to be a powder-monkey in one lesson. Might be useful sometime, should I want to blow up something."

"So—you've been holding out on me, have you?"

"No. Not really," she denied. "You see, I've been secretary to Don Frame, Chief Engineer for Ten-Ark Land and Lumber, for the past couple of years—so I know about powder-monkeys. I've tried to tell you before why I'm going to Stanley's headquarters. Harmon Radley, poor man, needed a secretary, and Hank Stanley borrowed me from Ten-Ark. But Mr. Radley's death may change that."

Parker absorbed the jolt of surprise—a pleasant one—and argued, "Why should it? There'll be another Chief, naturally—and he may feel the need of somebody to secretary him. Chiefs," sarcastically, "need a lot of such aids and refinements. But you know all about Chiefs, don't you?"

"About just one," she told him. "Don Frame and, of course, his assistant, Rance Layton. And by the way," she suddenly remembered, "Layton is coming on this job too. Assistant to the Chief, I was told. Well, of course, Stanleys are doing this job for Ten-Ark—"

"Go back," he interrupted sharply. "Back to that line about Layton coming on as assistant-chief. Take it from there, Miss Barry, and see if you recall anything about what my status will be after Layton takes over? I'm assistant-chief, as of this date, unless I've been canned. Have I been, or do you know?"

The fact that Parker's resignation only awaited writing and placing on Hank Stanley's desk, and to hell with this swamp and all jungles forever, made not a particle of difference. Resigning from a job is one thing, having a job resign from you is another!

"My information goes no farther," Miss Barry informed him. "I'm sorry. Really I am."

"Not that it makes any difference," Parker said with a shrug. "I've been in jungles so long that the only difference now between me and a native junglejack is that the native doesn't know any better. I've got to the point where it will have to be proved to me that there is a world not wholly surrounded by trees. That civilization is not just as dead outside as it is in here where it never has begun. Where there are far horizons, and a man may walk on solid ground and breathe air that isn't saturated with malaria and sour with the taste of rot. Dear God! I'll be damned good and glad to leave the stinking, treacherous swamp country behind forever!"

"Do you hate it so much as all that?" Miss Barry asked, genuinely interested.

"Hate it? Why, my good girl, I'm the original old Jungle Hater in person!"

"Well!" Eve Barry exclaimed, her emerald eyes laughing. "So that's how it is! Bet you muscled up to your first jungle, though, and told it cold turkey that you aimed to whip the daylights out of it. Jungles had no place in a progressive world. A world needing all their potential lumber for industry, and the soil they smother for growing corn and oats and potatoes. And the old swamp country whipped you instead. Whipped you to a frazzle—and you're admitting it!"

"Exactly. But I'm not yet punch-drunk nor slap-happy. I will be, though, if I keep on coming up for more punishment—which I don't intend to do. Five years of it has been just four years, eleven months and twenty-nine days too long. Thank you for listening!"

"Thorne Point! End of the line!" Ham-and-eggs sang out as the boat swung to a landing. They had reached headquarters.

A small group was on the wharf awaiting the *Bounder's* arrival, Hank Stanley at the fore. Parker helped the new secretary ashore, returned for the luggage and tossed it up. As he followed it, Hank stepped forward, held out a hand, grinned broadly and said:

"Welcome, Chief! Welcome home from the wars!"

III

PARKER, sitting at the desk to which he had been so off-handedly promoted, swivelled around and looked toward the outer door of his office, which was opening despite a whining protest from its hinges. When it was fully open, Stevie came in.

Stevie was big. So big he crowded the doorway, top, sides and bottom. Six-feet-four by the tape, his shoulders were incredibly broad and he had a chest like a Percheron stallion. That part of his face which his stubbly brown beard and mustache didn't cover was nut-brown and lineless, and his eyes, round and blue, were innocent. Stevie was minus about fifty percent of his marbles.

"Howdy, Billy," he greeted Parker, gravely ceremonious. "Tell Stevie to come right in and take a seat, why don't you?"

"Come right in, Stevie, and take a seat," Parker repeated accomodatingly.

The giant grinned, showing a full set of teeth which had never needed a dentist. He lowered himself onto a chair, looked with

a childish expectancy at the engineer and asked:

"Billy got some terbacker fur Stevie?"

Parker had been visited by Stevie before. He drew out a desk-drawer, fished up a plug of dark-brown chewing-tobacco and laid it on top. Stevie made a quick reach for it—and Parker snatched it away.

"Aw, Billy!" Stevie protested. "Don't do Stevie that way!"

"Half now, Stevie," the engineer offered, holding the plug up enticingly, "the other half when you've told me what you came for. What you say, old pardner? Putting out anything?"

Since Parker came on the job, six months before, the big dim-wit had called upon him frequently, always with something interesting, and sometimes important, to swap for tobacco. Oddly, Parker was the only one of the "furriners" with whom Stevie would have any dealings. Even with Hank and Bob Stanley, he was shy, sometimes even surly, but from the start he had treated the young assistant chief as an equal. Now that Parker was Chief, Stevie still, apparently, regarded him as an equal.

"Give Stevie half and he'll tell it!" Stevie's hunger, sharpened by denial, had loosened his tongue.

Parker opened his knife, halved the plug and pushed a half across the desk. Stevie grabbed it, tore off a hunk with his teeth and settled back in his chair, beaming contentedly. Parker waited.

"B-u-l-loommm!" Stevie erupted suddenly, watching the engineer cannily, his jaws working with measured regularity on his cud.

"Explosion, eh?" Parker commented. "Sounded just like one, too. But the Fourth of July has passed, Stevie—"

"Wasn't on no Fourth!" Stevie interrupted, leaning forward and lowering his voice. "Day before yestiddy. B-u-l-loommm! Just like that, but heaps louder. Stevie knows. Stevie heard it. He wouldn't' tell Billy he did if he didn't!"

Parker let his glance drop to the two strands of twisted and blackened wire on his desk-top, visual proof that the fatal dynamite explosion of two days before had been set off with a battery. Careful not to betray more than casual interest, he looked up at Stevie and said:

"Lots of folks have heard explosions, old pardner. I've heard plenty myself, and caused 'em too—"

"Billy didn't hear this one!" Stevie broke in excitedly. "Didn't cause it, neither! Billy couldn't of. Not clean off in Memphis, he couldn't!"

"Oh—that explosion," Parker yawned. "I didn't hear it, for a fact."

"Stevie was expecting to hear it," the giant confided. "Stevie knowed plumb well they was going to be one."

Stevie had something. Parker must be very careful now. The native's unstable mind held information and, unless he should suddenly go off on a tangent, it would be released. But—anything at all, too much interest on Parker's part or a betrayal of urgency, might send him careening.

"Well, Stevie," he said unconcernedly, "if somebody told you there was going to be one, of course you'd expect—"

"Nobody didn't tell Stevie!" in quick denial. "Stevie knows things without nobody telling him. Like knowing about yellow-jackets. Billy knows about yellow-jackets?"

MENTALLY cursing yellow-jackets, Parker nodded soberly and acknowledged that he knew plenty about yellow-jackets. "They sting to beat hell!" he declared reminiscently.

Stevie leered cunningly, and said, "Stevie's ain't going to sting nobody. They can't. They ain't got no stingers. Billy," with a portentous wink, "want to go see whether they have or not? They ain't fur off. Give Stevie that other half of terbacker and he'll show Billy where them yellow boys is at. They's a whole big heap of 'em!"

Surrendering to that meaning wink Stevie had given him, Parker was reaching for his hat when an inner door opened and Eve Barry came in. At sight of Eve, Stevie got up hastily, took off his out-size black hat and stood twisting the crown between his fingers. Eve just stared.

"Stevie's going now, Billy," the giant muttered, moving sidewise toward the door. "See Billy tomorrer mebbe."

Parker opened a desk-drawer, hesitated, shook his head and closed it. "In that case, Stevie," he said, "I'll give you the rest

of the tobacco I've got for you—tomorrow. Goodbye now."

"Aw, Billy!" Stevie exclaimed, coming to the desk. "Stevie ain't in such a very big hurry!"

"Wait for me at the stables," Parker told him, nodding toward the door. "I'll be there soon—with the tobacco."

Stevie lumbered out.

"The files you were asking for, Chief. All complete," Miss Barry said, coming to the desk and laying a sheaf of papers on it. "And how do you feel about Chief Engineers this morning?" she asked, her green eyes teasing.

"I'm trying to adjust to the new perspective," he responded cheerfully. "And, do you know, I think I'm going to be able to do it? Right now, I've got to find out the facts about that dynamite that killed Radley and Jelks. Have to, else have Hatfield on my neck from now on. See what a fix I'm in?"

"But you surely can prove you were in Memphis, can't you?"

"Surely. If it comes to that. But Hatfield harbors a deep suspicion that I had an accomplice. You see, Miss Barry," seriously, "according to the sheriff, I had a motive, even plural motives. And—still according to Hatfield—I'm the only one hereabouts having motive. I might, for instance, have been wishful to step into Radley's shoes."

"But Mr. Stanley said last night that Radley was slated to go, as far back as one month past," Eve Barry pointed out. "You were to be stepped up—"

"Yes—but I didn't know about it. Hank and Bob hadn't told me. Anyhow, if that motive doesn't stand up, how about this one? Radley and I didn't get along. The old at-dagger's-point stuff. He hated my guts and I hated his. No doubt about that. It's quite well known here, there and yonder. A fine motive that, guaranteed to wear like strap-iron and not fade in the washing. Look that one over. What about it?"

"Why didn't Radley fire you, if he disliked you so much?" was Eve's reasonable reaction.

"He did. More than once. But the Stanleys didn't see eye to eye with him. The truth is, Miss Barry," he explained, "Harmon Radley was a consultant. In the field he was a washout. It took time for the Stanleys to realize it. That's as much of the story as you need to get the idea."

"Well," thoughtfully, "it doesn't look so good, does it?"

"If Prosecutor Dancroft thinks he can make a case that a jury would go along with," Parker was positive, "he won't ask too many questions. He'll just order a warrant."

Eve's eyes were clouded with doubt. "I just can't agree with your viewpoint!" she declared. "It sounds haywire. Do you mean you question the prosecutor's integrity? That prosecutors don't try cases fairly and on their merits?"

"Don't believe either side does," emphatically. "Prosecution and defense both scrape the bottom of the barrel for every advantage they can sift out—and to hell with pure truth and sweet justice. But," he ended severely, "you're too young entirely to have the brutal facts of life laid bare to you. So run along and secretary somebody else for the moment. I've got a date with Stevie."

IV

PARKER found the giant waiting for him at the stables, but when he told the stableman to saddle his horse, Stevie objected stubbornly.

"Stevie won't go if Billy won't walk!" he declared.

Parker yielded.

The jungle, green and brush-choked, crowded right up to the clearing in which stood the sprawling ex-clubhouse that served the construction company as headquarters, and the giant unerringly hit a trail the existence of which even Parker hadn't known. An animal-trail, and Stevie knew many. The way lay south and a bit west, angling toward Sutfin's Slough.

When Stevie had come within a hundred yards of the slough, at a point perhaps a half-mile west of the Ten-Ark right-of-way, he came to a stop where a thicket of buckbrush and hazel, interlaced with rope-like vines, seemed to bar farther progress.

Bidding Parker stay where he was, Stevie scouted dog-like through the timber adjacent to the patch of brush, making certain nobody was observing them, then came

back, entered the thicket by still another animal-trail and led on to a tiny clearing in the heart of it.

"In there!" he said exultantly. "Yellow boys—heaps of 'em!"

The log at which he pointed was about three feet through, and partly hollow. Parker looked enquiringly at Stevie, said:

"All right. Go ahead. Show me."

Stevie pointed toward the log's far end. "It's choked up with leaves and sticks, Billy. Unchoke it while Stevie watches. Go ahead. Them yellow boys won't sting!"

Stevie for the time at least was boss and knew it. Parker knew it too. So he got down on his knees at the far end of the log and started unchoking it. The obstructing debris had been loosely placed and gave no trouble. When he had removed all of it, the engineer leaned over, peered inside the hollow—and swore savagely.

As far as he could see inside the log, it was packed with sticks of dynamite!

Stevie's yellow-jackets!

Parker drew out a stick and looked at it's yellowish-brown wrapper. It had not come from the Stanley powder-shack, being a different brand altogether.

"Enough destruction in that log," he said aloud, "to blow the bottom right out of Hell! Stevie, what do you know about it?"

Stevie didn't reply—for the very good reason that he hadn't heard. He wasn't there.

Parker got to his feet, swearing sincerely but futilely. While the examination of the log's surprising cache had been occupying him, Stevie had taken a powder!

Had he run away in order to avoid the questions he foresaw coming, Parker wondered. Did he know the source of the sticks of dynamite, and was he unwilling to tell—or afraid to?

A brittle stick cracked under somebody's foot close behind Parker, and he turned quickly, squinting his eyes at the cause of the startling sound.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he exclaimed in mock exasperation. "What queer things a guy can see when he goes hunting without a gun!"

Sheriff Hatfield didn't think that at all funny. At least, his grim, leathery face betrayed no sign of amusement. He said:

"I was hunting—with a gun," tapping the black butt of an over-size weapon on his hip. "I take it, then, seeing you ain't got your gun, you wasn't hunting for anything? But that ain't saying you didn't—well, say find something?"

"Nothing lost," Parker retorted, aware of the sheriff's mental direction and resolved to beat him to it. "Nobody could possibly lose a yellow log full of dynamite—unless he happened to be the same guy that lost the bass-drum?"

"Don't know nothing about any feller losing a bass-drum—Hatfield began, his blue eyes shifting to the log, but was interrupted.

"I'm responsible for Hatfield being here, and if it causes trouble for you, Parker—you are Parker, aren't you?"

The engineer nodded. More than in the sheriff, his interest had all along been centered in the sheriff's companion. Medium-tall, broad-shouldered and thick through the chest, he'd be around thirty years of age, Parker estimated. Sandy hair, clipped mustache a bit sandier, and garbed after the notion of a sport's or maybe an office-man's conception of what well-dressed field-engineers were wearing. A Fancy Dan sort, Parker stamped him.

"I'll be sorry, if it does cause you trouble, Parker," the young man resumed, eying Parker's work-stained cords, scuffed field-boots and maltreated Stetson with evident distaste. "But I didn't have the least idea you would be here—"

"Never mind that, Layton," Hatfield broke in, exhibiting something closely akin to irritation. "I figger Parker can easy explain howcome him to be here, and—" walking quickly to the denuded end of the hollow log, he reached inside, jerked out a stick of dynamite and held it up triumphantly, "howcome him to know about a cache of dynamite being in this log. Yeah, I figger Parker will be able to explain all that—plumb easy!"

"Poorly staged, Sheriff—so I'm afraid I can't applaud," Parker commented critically. "Utterly lacking in the sheer impact of good drama. Not even passable melodrama. Climax strictly anti—hence a flop. You see," he went on drawingly, "too many people knew the pay-off. You, Layton, myself and whoever put the dynamite

there. Unless," as though struck by a startling thought, one of you put it there?"

Layton started, turned surprised eyes in Parker's direction and said protestingly, "You don't really mean that, do you? That I might have put it there, or the sheriff?"

"Of course he don't mean it!" Hatfield snapped, showing anger for the first time since Parker had known him. "Parker's just being funny. His idea of being, anyhow. If you really want to be plumb funny," eyes switching balefully upon the engineer, "I'll be tickled nigh to death to hear you explain howcome—"

"I knew the log was packed with dynamite," Parker finished for him. "Just say that I have a keen nose for dynamite. Trail it to its lair by scent alone. Say any damned thing you please, Hatfield—but be careful what it pleases you to say. You may have to prove it."

He turned and moved off toward the edge of the little clearing.

"Hey, you!" Hatfield yelped angrily. "You stay right here!"

Parker turned slowly and looked at him. "Am I under arrest?" he asked quietly.

"Not yet you ain't! But you—!"

"Are you going to arrest me?"

"Figger to, but not—!"

"Not right here and now? That what you mean?"

"I'll arrest you when I get damned good and ready," Hatfield shouted furiously.

Parker nodded. "Until you do get damned good and ready!" he said contemptuously, "you can go to hell and like it!"

He walked on out of the clearing.

V

PARKER'S conviction that legal-justice is purely an abstraction put down another root as he walked away from the tiny clearing and it's log-full of potential destruction.

"Talk about your Ogpu, your Gestapo and all the rest of the unholy foreign persecution organizations," he reflected scornfully, "their star performers could learn things from just any one of our hick sheriffs they might happen onto!"

Back at Headquarters, he spent a few minutes talking with the staff in the general-room, read late weather reports, then went in to see Hank Stanley.

Hank Stanley, General Superintendent of Stanley Brothers, was a tall, skinny, almost bald man having the look of a priest who had heard in his time far too many confessions. His face was lined, cynical, but redeemed by deep, shrewd eyes which twinkled almost constantly, as though admiting they couldn't help what they saw and might as well be amused by it. Dirt-and-steel contractors often get to look like that.

Hank brought up a bottle of *Old Crow* and a couple of glasses from a drawer, put them on the desk, squinted his merry eyes at Parker and asked:

"Anything special?"

"About Rance Layton," Parker replied, pouring a drink. "Who dug him up and why?"

"Radley nominated him quite a while ago as a replacement for you. That was right after Bob and I gave you the green light about those four extra water-gaps of unpleasant memory. Radley just couldn't forgive you for getting the decision on that. It poisoned his days and embittered his nights. So he plugged hard to get rid of you. Rance Layton was his choice."

"The news got about in Ten-Ark's Helena office that Layton was headed in here to replace me," Parker told him. "A mistake —but how could the mistake have been made? I'm not asking just out of idle curiosity. I want a line on the situation and Layton."

"I'll give you what I know. Frame, down at T-A, gave Layton the name of being a good man. We hired him for an assistant— but not to assist Radley. To assist you. We knew that Radley would have to go. And that reminds me, Bill," he ended, "that Layton should be showing up on the job."

"Layton's showed up, all right, Hank," Parker informed him. "But not on the job. He showed up this morning, along with Sheriff Hatfield. Showed up in the middle of a thicket where I was examining a hollow log. The log, by the way, was chock full of sticks of dynamite."

Stanley's face-muscles twitched almost imperceptibly and his eyes squinted. Otherwise there was no sign that he had been jolted.

"Hadn't heard before that dynamite grows in hollow logs, like a sort of fungus,"

he commented. "But, of course, there may be a lot of things I don't know about hollow logs and dynamite."

"This batch didn't come from our powder-shack. A brand we've never used. Some of it was probably used on our job, though. Day before yesterday."

Hank nodded understandingly. "Why so damned much of it? You say the log was chock full?"

Parker nodded, his face-lines tightening. "Yes. The stuff hadn't been there long. Jackets too fresh and clean. A few days only, I'd say—"

"And that looks like somebody proposes to blow up a lotta things around here!" Hank's eyes were not twinkling now. "Where is the stuff now?"

"Hatfield was in charge of it when I left," Parker replied, grinning slightly. "He and Layton. Seems Layton had prior knowledge of the dynamite-log. Anyhow, he brought Hatfield to the spot."

"Well, damn it to hell! You found out something about that, didn't you?"

Parker shook his head. "Lucky to keep out of handcuffs. Hatfield is trying his heaviest to fit me with a rope necktie. I'm not going to be nice to him while he does it. So I made him hot as hell, then walked off and left him. Layton could wait. When he shows up, I'll be interested in hearing his explanation."

"Hatfield is not exactly a total loss at the sheriffing business, Bill," Hank said, "but he's plenty wet in this instance. I'll have a talk with him—"

"No. Leave him to me. I'll treat him rough, and you won't. Anyhow, I'm not worried about him as much as I am about other things. Who really killed Radley and Jelks poses a problem of importance. That's true. But who's aiming to sabotage Ten-Ark's railroad by the dynamite route and by creating an even more serious manpower shortage is far more important. We can't help Radley and Jelks. We can concentrate on protecting the job—and chances are we can do it. Bob's in Memphis, isn't he?"

"Yes. Went this morning. Why?"

"He can get some dope there which may be important to us and may not. Heard a rumor in Memphis, or maybe not a rumor exactly, that the recently defunct Chickasabwa Trust financed Ten-Ark for the railroad. Had a lathering of T-A paper. As good as money in the bank, that paper, and somebody bought it. Telephone Bob to dig out who, will you?"

"Okay. Any idea who bought it?"

"Wouldn't be surprised if St. Francis Navigation did."

"Hell's bells!" Hank exclaimed. "That river-logging outfit wouldn't be pulling stuff. Why, Bill, river-transportation quit bucking rails seventy-five years ago. Get modern, fellow!"

"Navigation wouldn't buck rails," Parker acknowledged. "It's river-logging is out—but it's far from out. Find out about that T-A paper. You may get a surprise."

"Navigation fight Ten-Ark?" derisively. "Hell, no! That wouldn't be logical!"

"With a gent named Elias Bender in the saddle for Navigation, all rules of logic are suspended," Parker said stubbornly. "If you get a chance to cut that guy's throat in safety—do. Anyhow, be expecting him."

Parker went back to his office, leaving his boss somewhat confused about which way was up—Parker himself not being entirely sure about it.

His phone was ringing and he took up the receiver. Riley, weather-bureau chief at Memphis, was calling.

"Atmospheric pressure to the north indicates one helluva blow, with rain, is building over the upper Mississip', Bill. May reach down into the delta country. How will it catch you, in case it does? Pants down as usual?"

"Nakeder than Adam! Do you mean it?"

"Yeah. It may not reach down as far as you are, but you might as well have it to worry over. Worry now might save the day later. Be good—and smart!"

Parker frowned over the news, then got Connor, Stanley's Memphis man-catcher, on the phone.

"Con," he asked, "how come you're not shipping trackers?"

"How come you say I ain't shipping? I shipped you fifty fuzztails a week ago, and fifty-three days ago, chaperons with 'em. Delivered at Harper's Station."

"Not one of them reached the job," Parker told him, the lines bracketing his mouth hardening. "Those chaperons sold us down the river. But keep on shipping

me gandies. Spikers, hustlers and stiffs. Hold the next batch, though, until I say ship. So long."

Parker got up, examined the cartridges in his Colt, holstered it and went out to the stables.

VI

HALF a mile from Headquarters, Parker reined up and watched one-hundred mule-skinners, three-hundred little rabbit-mules and fifty sweaty muckers moving steadily toward the end of the dirt job. Farther along were as many more men and mules, all engaged, under the direction of the boss levelman. Pete Sanders, in bringing the railroad-dump up to grade. Getting set for ties and rails.

Those little rabbit mules, averaging around one-thousand pounds apiece, were surely worth their feed on a jungle job. Far down the dump, where the fresnol gang was at work, they looked more like little black guinea pigs than they did mules.

He rode on along the dump, descended to the right-of-way, crossed Coon Creek on a pontoon-bridge and pulled up at rail-end.

Under seasoned eyes of Red McCarty, who surely knew his rails, spike-mauls, and track-gauges, an inadequately small bunch of steel gangers were laying down track.

The steady, bell-toned ring of mauls on spikes, the "heave-ho an' let 'er go!" of the rail-hustlers, the bawdy pacesong from the hoarse throat and leather-lungs of Big Spike Cassidy, swinging the lead maul—all would have been music in Parker's ears, had there been two-hundred men on the job instead of a bare fifty. As it was, he felt anything but elation.

Five miles more of naked dump—and the Fall rains apt to come storming in at any time. That naked dump was now his responsibility. A responsibility which would not permit itself to be forgotten during the long days, and which would nag him into restless wakefulness during the longer nights he saw ahead. Hot nights made more oppressive still by miasmatic moisture which bedraggled everything and freshened nothing.

And the weird voices of the jungle didn't help. Always in the night, the jungle had voices. Sometimes it seemed there were millions of voices, and all of differing pitch and tone. The voices never actually said anything. They just harassed and annoyed. The swamp's smothering closeness, its terrific heat, its mysteries and its fantastic voices—

"Well," Parker shrugged, "what the hell else could you expect of a jungle?"

He dismounted, tied to a bush on the east side of the right-of-way and struck off afoot over a trail in the direction of St. Francis River.

At the end of a quarter-mile the smell of cooking food notified him that he was close to his objective. The food-smells grew stronger, and he came to a clearing which had been hacked out of the jungle. Stopping at the outer edge, he looked the setup over.

Under his eyes lay a camp, spotted with hovels built of poles and bark. They might have been mistaken for hog-shelters, had it not been for the men who, standing, sitting and lying about, advertised their tenancy.

IN THE center of the clearing, four men, under the supervising eye of a big grizzle-haired man, worked about a cooking-fire where half a dozen square five-gallon tins steamed and boiled.

Parker, who had seen many such camps in his time, was interested only in the men. He was sizing them up. Virtually all the jungles were steel men, with just a scattering of skinners and muckers among them.

Parker walked across the clearing, stopped near the fire and called out:

"Are any of you men work-ways? Want to set in for Stanley Brothers? Better wages than the main lines are paying. Better camps. Better grub. Work for all. How many takers?"

The big, grizzle-haired man hurried toward Parker. He had only one good eye—but it glittered menacingly.

"Ain't none of these stiffs work-ways!" he declared with heat. "If they was, feller, they know where the job is. And—you won't find no better time to shake it out of here than right now!"

Parker looked contemptuously at the one-eyed cook. His temper suddenly flared, and, bringing up a hard fist from around his

knees, he connected with the solid, bristly jaw of the blinker. The wallop was so terrific it lifted the cook clear off the ground, and dropped him as limp as one of his own dishrags.

The bull-cooks, making clubs of their wooden ladles, started a rush for the engineer. They were out for blood.

Parker dropped a hand to the butt of his Colt, and backed slowly toward where the trail entered the clearing. The stiffs, impressed by his hard face and the Colt, halted and went into a huddle. Parker reached the trail, turned and walked rapidly toward the right-of-way.

It was not a good idea, clouting that cook, and the engineer knew it. But, even so, he had learned something important. He had learned where those steel men Connor had shipped out were holing-up.

He had covered half the distance to the right-of-way, when, with the suddenness of a dynamite explosion, a heavy weight fell upon his back and shoulders. Powerful arms wrapped him 'round, pinning his own arms against his body. Parker bowed his back, heaved his shoulders sharply forward, and felt the arms of the unseen man relax, slip a trifle—

The engineer twisted around and gripped his attacker. He heaved upward, but found that he was tackling a weight he could hardly budge.

The attacker was Stevie—and his body was like a big chunk of concrete!

Stevie was not idle. Parker felt a bearded chin dig into his neck. A thick arm encircled his middle, and a fist connected just above the kidneys. He almost let go his grip at that, but recovered and managed to hold on. He lashed out with his right leg, wrapped it around Stevie's left, tripped him—and they went down together.

And then they fought. They brought out everything they had. One moment Parker would be uppermost, then Stevie would come up on top. They rolled off the trail, breaking down brush almost as though a bulldozer had done it. They gouged, slugged, kicked, and threshed about like two pit-bulls in a battle to a finish.

Pain shot through the engineer's body as, with an animal-like snarl, the giant fastened his teeth in his left shoulder, ripping flannel cloth as though it were so much tissue paper. Stevie's big, shaggy head was hard against him, tossing from side to side, worrying his prey as a tiger might have done.

Parker made an extra effort—and got the butt of his revolver in his fingers. He wriggled free of leather and brought it up.

The giant, feeling the prod of the gun barrel against his body, loosed his tearing teeth from the engineer's shoulder and threw himself to one side.

Parker had already started squeezing the trigger, and the roar of his gun crashed the jungle stillness like the roll of thunder.

Stevie came back. Came back strongly and with animal savagery. The thick fingers of his left hand grasped the enginer's gun-arm at the wrist and pain shot through him. Suddenly he relaxed, gave his arm deceptively to the pressure of those torturing fingers. The fingers slid down toward the gun-butt in Parker's hand.

Parker, with a quick twist, freed his arm and jambed the muzzle of his gun against the giant's middle. His forefinger tightened on the trigger—

"For God's sake don't shoot!"

At sound of the voice, the giant's body relaxed and he lay perfectly still. Parker wrenched himself away and stood up. He shot a glance up the trail.

Eve Barry was standing there!

VII

"HE—HE doesn't understand what he's doing!" her voice was broken, frightened.

"I don't understand either!" Parker snapped, walking toward her. "Since you're protecting him, maybe you can explain why Stevie jumped me?"

Eve's fright-brightened eyes sent a glance past him, and Parker turned quickly. Stevie was slipping silently into the brush. Parker almost reached for his gun-butt, but didn't.

"What's your interest in Stevie?" he demanded, turning on the girl.

"Couldn't my interest have been in both of you?" Eve countered. "You were about to pull that trigger. Was killing him necessary?"

"I had such an impression at the moment. When you yelled, Stevie quit cold. The impression vanished. Why should he have quit because you yelled? And what

in hell are you doing on this trail, come to think of it?"

Riding-garb certainly became Eve, he thought while waiting for her to make up her mind. She had been spying, and was going to lie, of course. That was obvious. But—she certainly did look fetching in her togs. Some women looked like hell in boots and britches. Mannish. But Eve was even more seductively womanish—

He checked himself right there, and concentrated on the thought that she was going to lie to him. He'd be obliging, give her time to make up a good one—then he'd tear hell out of it.

"Oh!" Eve was observing with solicitous eyes his shredded shirt-sleeve and gnawed shoulder. "He did that! I'm so sorry—!"

"Don't be! And don't try to evade. What brought you here?"

His glance took in the chestnut-sorrel whose bridle-reins were looped over her arm. One from the stables. Then his eyes went back to the rider. From the soles of her high-arched riding-boots to the mannish hat which sought futilely to confine red-gold ringlets that defied confinement, Eve was compelling. Polished, sophisticated—

And probably an accomplished liar in the bargain!

"I had nothing to do," Eve told him, having seemingly made up her story, "and I like horseback-riding. You had ridden down the right-of-way, so I thought I might overtake you, never thinking you'd object. I found your horse tied, saw this path and followed it. Of course if this is restricted territory, sacred to males only, I shouldn't have come. But I'm glad I did. You'd have been sorry, had you pulled that trigger."

Whether Eve's quite believable explanation did it or just Eve herself was responsible, Parker's temper had cooled. Another sharp glance, and he decided she might not be quite such a liar after all. He said:

"Let's get back to the right-of-way. There's a bunch of tough babies back yonder," nodding over a shoulder, "and they might have notions."

Eve smiled her readiness, and they went along the trail together.

"Please don't go riding alone again, Eve," he requested. "Somebody should have warned you."

"The stableman did say that he didn't think you'd like me to," Eve told him.

"That was understating it. I emphatically do not want you to!"

"Is—is it so dangerous?"

"The jungle is always dangerous. Especially so when there are a few hundred half-savage men about. Not the native men. They're safe enough. I can't make it too clear to you, though, that our men are not. They have lusty appetites, are wholly uninhibited, and many are dodging the law. They don't have homes, but just drift. Come day, go day, God send payday. That's their mental habit. So please ride with somebody after this."

"I will, Chief. I won't ride at all, if that's best," she offered.

"Riding is good for you, and there's nothing much to do for recreation but that. The timekeepers, commissary clerks, and our two young draftsmen—they're okay. Pete Sanders, our redheaded boss levelman, will be delighted—but he's damned susceptible, so go easy with him."

Eve laughed musically. "But," she wanted to know, "how about him going easy with me? How do you know I'm not very susceptible too?"

"I'll bet you're not. Not too much so, at any rate. But if you are, Pete is a fine chap. A comer. Should be assistant chief, now—and would be except for Layton. And I'm not sure he won't be, regardless of Layton."

Parker was not consciously watching Eve to note her reactions, but when Layton was mentioned she seemed to draw within herself. The smile faded and her eyes became broody. Parker, of course, might have read the signs wrong.

"What about the trouble with the big fellow?" Eve asked presently. "Why did you two mix it?"

"I haven't the answer," Parker told her. "He was out of the brush and onto me in a flash—in spite of the fact that we've always before been buddies. Somebody, of course, set him on, and when I find somebody who has strong influence over him I'll know who did the setting—and, maybe, why."

Eve was silent until they entered the right-of-way, then she asked, "Do you know much about him—Stevie, I mean? Who he is and where he stays, and all that?"

"He's just a sort of male Topsy, I think. Old Cap Layton took him in from somewhere when he was maybe ten or twelve years old. He's probably twenty-five now, felt sorry for him, I guess. Anyhow, he still lives at the Layton place, a queer sort of house over on Big Caney, now that old Cap is dead. Rance should know his history, although I doubt if he knows Stevie's beginnings, any more than his father did. I made his acquaintance six months ago; and he cottoned to me, which makes his attack this afternoon almost incredible. I'm sorry, because if he gets dangerous the county will put him away."

Eve gave a small gasp. "Oh, that would be awful!" she exclaimed. "He couldn't survive being cooped up, do you think?"

"Probably not, but maybe it won't come to that."

"You—you're not afraid for yourself, are you?"

"No. But damned if I want him on my back any more!"

"You don't intend to report this on him, then?"

Parker laughed. "Of course not. If I'd reported all the guys who have jumped me, first and last—oh, well, I'll take care of Stevie," he ended abruptly.

Why did the girl insist on discussing Stevie? Could it be she really had a definite, personal motive for being so solicitous concerning his welfare? Nonsense, probably. Still—Stevie had quit the fight the instant he heard her voice. How account for that?

He couldn't, so he quit trying.

He gave Eve a hand up, mounted his horse and they rode back toward Headquarters. They had ridden within half a mile of the stables when Parker, riding on the right, abruptly drew up. His glance had picked up something on the ground beside the dump.

Two separate trails of hoofprints showed clearly in the soft earth at that point, one trail indicating that a rider had come down the right-of-way from toward Headquarters, reached the spot and turned off. The other showed that a rider had come up the right-of-way to the same point, and had also turned off.

Two riders had met there, and not many horsebackers used the right-of-way.

Parker got down and examined the two trails with eyes accustomed to that sort of thing. Ordinarily, he wouldn't have done that, but strange things had happened of late and were still happening. Murder, a dynamite-filled hollow log, Stevie's strange hostility, and a deliberately contrived manpower shortage. All that surely added up to something.

Walking toward the edge of the right-of-way, he stooped and picked up a wastefully-long cigarette-butt. A ready-rolled cigarette. Most men on the job rolled their own. He studied the butt for a moment, then walked on to where a flat-topped stump stood at the jungle's edge, and read more sign.

One of the horses was carrying a loose shoe on the left forefoot. On the outside edge of the hoof. The slipping plate showed that. Where, he wondered, had he seen just such a track before—and very recently? That he had seen it he knew. A moment's concentration gave him the answer.

He had seen it on the trail from the jungle-camp as he and Eve walked along. Eve's chestnut-sorrel was carrying a loose shoe on the left forefoot. Her mount had laid one of the trails.

He went back, swung into his saddle and said:

"Let's ride."

They rode in silence for a while, then Eve broke it.

"Well, Charlie Chan," she asked lightly, "what did you deduce from your microscopic examination of the scene of the crime?"

"Quite a lot. For instance, you sat on a stump there, having ridden down the right-of-way expecting to meet somebody, and arriving first. Probably Layton, and you were there by appointment."

He heard Eve's bitten-off explanation, but did not look at her. "You couldn't possibly know that—even if it were true!" she declared. "You couldn't have read that, Mr. Chan, with your microscope!"

"You're wrong there," the engineer disputed quietly. "You sat on the stump—and you were expecting somebody to arrive from down the right-of-way. I know that, because you got up from the stump and walked out to where you could see down the right-of-way. You did that several times. Always, your boots toed down the

right-of-way. Never up. A very simple matter to read the ground-sign, Eve. Not nearly so simple to read you."

There was a brief silence, then Eve said, "What do you think there might be for you to read? I'll admit that you have read the sign accurately. But what does it matter? I did wait for Rance Layton—and there was no deeply dark and mysterious reason involved. Rance is a man. Rather an attractive man, and an acquaintance. And—I'm a woman, even though you don't seem aware of me as such. So what?"

"So—I hate like hell to call you a liar, Eve, but that's exactly what you're doing now. Lying," Parker came back promptly. "No man—especially a man such as this Fancy Dan Layton—would have remained with a pretty woman at a romantic tryst only long enough to half-smoke one cigarette. Another thing. Neither of you hitched your horses. Fancy stood, as his bootprints showed—and he never even approached you closer than five or six feet. If you had romance in mind when you dated him there, then your charms seem to have been on the blink. No. You had some other reason. Hadn't you better come clean, Eve?"

She was so still, after that, Parker gave her a quick glance. What he saw didn't make him feel too happy. Eve's face was white, and her eyes, fixed upon him, were protesting.

He was being brutal, he knew—but some kind of dangerous game was being played there in the jungle, and Eve Barry was a party to it. Ten-Ark had a big stake there, so had Stanley Brothers—and this was Parker's job. Eve Barry wouldn't give up anything at all of her own will. She wasn't the sort who could be coaxed—and damn coaxing anyhow.

"Eve," he said, "did you come here to help cross up the job? Better tell me now—because I'm going to be tough as hell if I have to hammer it out of you. I'm not at all a nice man, Eve, when somebody tries to cross up a job I'm running. Understandable, isn't it?"

EVE began talking, holding her voice level by an apparent effort. "I had begun to think, Bill Parker, that you might be, underneath your toughness, human. Maybe you would be if you were not running one of your damned jobs. You don't run a job, actually. You are the job—and a job can't feel. Can be only a job. You're going to be hard, tough, because you think I have somehow got in your way. Crossing the job up, or trying too. You wouldn't be interested in a denial without proof. You'll just reach for your dynamite and start blasting—just as though I were a stump or a tree that must be removed. True—isn't it?"

Parker considered that briefly, then answered.

"A powder-puff wouldn't get anywhere at all on my kind of job, Eve," he told her quietly. "Track men and dirt movers are tough. They have to be to do their kind of work. And it takes a man who is tough to handle them. If you are hurting the job, Eve, and I become convinced you are, then you'll get what's coming to you. Sorry—but that's how things stand."

They had arrived at Thorne Point, and the horses of their own accord turned toward the stables. The sun was dropping now behind the jungle wall, and the day would soon be turned over to the katydids, tree-toads, bull-frogs, and the million or so other pests which choose to croon and wail and screech by night.

Parker swung down and started to offer Eve a lift. Instead, he stood and looked at her. Not a gay Eve Barry, now. She had made no move to dismount. Just sat there, dejection riding her hard. Parker snapped out of it and went to her, reached up and lifted her out of the saddle.

"Eve," he said, "I'm sorry about this. If I'm wrong, I shall be sorrier still. If you're on a spot, tell me about it. Damn it all, if you have let yourself be drawn into a nasty mess, tell me and I'll try and get you out of it. Think it over—will you?"

Eve lifted her eyes quickly to Parker's, and her lower lip trembled. She released her hands which he had taken in his, and said, "Thank you, Chief. But there's nothing to think over."

VIII

PARKER had bathed, shaved and was daubing iodine on his chewed shoulder when the door of his bedroom opened and Pete Sanders, redheaded boss-levelman, came in. He was followed by Sheriff Hat-

field and Layton. Pete looked at the injured shoulder, and asked:

"Run into a swinging gate, or something?"

"Or something," Parker told him. "Ready with that warrant, Hatfield? Sit down. When I finish dressing I'll look it over."

"No warrant, Parker," Hatfield said, leaning against the door and looking glum. "Remember a feller used to work here, called Pug Hillyers?"

Parker searched his mind, nodded and said, "A dump-foreman. Yeah, I remember him. Canned him for busting a mule's ribs with a shovel. Coupla months back. What about him?"

"Found him dead in a brier thicket about two hours ago," Hatfield told him. "Wasn't all we found, neither. One of these detonater boxes was there with him, and a lotta wire hitched to it. Better'n two hundred foot, or such matter. Hillyers' neck was broke, his backbone was too, and he was messed up right considerable. Looked like a bear might of had holt of him. Thought you'd like to know about it."

Parker slipped on a shirt and buttoned it. His mind was working fast. A bear might have had hold of him! "Figure Hillyers was that accomplice of mine you've been beating the brush for?" he fenced. "I had to sock him with a pickhandle when I canned him, and when I saw him last he didn't seem any too friendly. Still—that may have been a stall, eh?"

Layton spoke. "Hillyers was evidently the one who exploded the dynamite that killed Radley and Jelks, Chief," he offered. "Found his body about half a mile from the right-of-way, and on a fairly direct line from the blow-up. He can't have been dead more than a couple of days," significantly.

"How'd you happen to locate him?"

"Usual way," Hatfield shrugged. "Buzzards. Stevie saw 'em, reported it to me. I took some men and went there. Layton was with me."

"Find anything on the body that might give a hint or so as to why he blew up the abutment? A letter, maybe, from whoever hired him?"

"What makes you think he was hired, Parker?" Hatfield asked sharply.

"He would hardly have done it, otherwise. Certainly not just to get even with the company for canning him."

"How about getting even with you—for canning him and busting him over the head with that pickhandle to boot?"

PARKER shrugged. "Have it that way, if you want to. It was my pickhandle against his Number Two shovel—and the odds were with the pickhandle. Nothing unusual about a fracas like that. Not on a dirt-and-steel job. Don't believe Hillyers would have thought anything about it, after his head healed, and blowing up the job wouldn't be costing me anything, you know. If he blew that abutment," positively, "somebody hired him to blow it. And," grinning at Hatfield's reflection in the mirror, as he knotted a tie, "I didn't hire him."

Hatfield was silent for a moment, while he filled a pipe and lighted it. He said: "I ain't accusing you."

"Thanks," from Parker. "There's something I'd like to ask you, Layton," he went on, turning to the engineer. "How did you learn about that dynamite-log—if you don't mind telling me?"

"I don't mind at all," Layton assured him. "Stevie showed me the log, early this morning. But don't ask me how he came to know about it, because he didn't confide in me about that. He may have just happened onto it—but is that likely?"

"Stevie say he just happened onto it?"

"He was very vague about it. For your information, Parker," Layton went on, "I am Stevie's guardian, he being an incompetent. My father was his guardian, appointed at his solicitation by a proper court, and when he died the obligation passed to me. If Stevie won't tell me things, he won't tell anybody. And—he knows more than he told about the log, I'm almost certain."

"You have considerable influence with him, I take it?"

"Well—I would hardly say that. I have the means of bringing Stevie to time when he gets stubborn. Put it that way," Layton offered in explanation.

"I suppose you're custodian of Stevie's worldly goods too, since you're his guardian?" Parker asked, as he got into his coat.

"Worldly goods?" Layton laughed at that. "Hell, he hasn't any. Never had more than one shirt to his back, Parker,

until dad took him in. Nobody knows who he is or where he came from, not even how he came to be here in the jungle. Worldly goods—that's a laugh!"

"Leaving Stevie wherever he is at right now," Hatfield put in irritably, "we'll get back to this here murder. You never hear anybody comment that you and Radly looked something alike, Parker? Same build. Both about six-foot tall and sorta boney. Generally wore the same kind of rig, only Radley's was more respectable looking. That suggest anything special to you?"

PARKER looked steadily at Hatfield for a moment, nodded approvingly and said: "Now you're beginning to make sense, Sheriff. Congratulations. I got the same notion—quite a while back."

"Huh? You did? Well—I be damned! That somebody aimed to blow you up, made a mistake and got Radley? You figgered it that way?"

Again Parker nodded. "I was supposed to be making the inspection, and it couldn't have been generally known that I wasn't on the job to do it. At a distance of—say a hundred feet or so, Radley might easily have been mistaken for me. I think that is the answer, Hatfield. I have another reason for thinking so, but I'm not going to tell you about it. Not yet, at any rate. It wouldn't help you any—and you wouldn't believe it, anyhow."

"You can't know what I might or might not believe," Hatfield pointed out rather reasonably. "But I'm willing to pass that, for now. It ain't as if I was asking your help, Parker. If I was, I'd insist on you telling me. But I ain't asking it. I ain't plumb sure about you yet—either way. I'll be getting along, now. You going home, Layton, or staying here?" He opened the door.

"Be right with you," Layton told him. "What time shall I show up for work tomorrow, Chief—or do I show up?"

"Hired, wasn't you?" from Parker.

"Yes. But since you're Chief now, you might have other intentions. Have you?"

"Show up at eight tomorrow morning, Layton," Parker told him. "Be seeing you again soon, Sheriff—with or without?"

"With or without—what?"

"Handcuffs!" Parker chuckled.

Hatfield's facial expression hadn't changed any, as he left the room. It was still glum.

"He's going to be badly disappointed, Chief," Pete laughed, "if he doesn't get to heave you in the clink!"

"Sit down, Pete," Parker requested, setting the example. "I want to give you some things to occupy you. Keep you out of mischief—"

"Like putting rat-poison in Layton's nursing-bottles?" Pete interrupted sourly. "What a panty-waist your assistant turned out to be!"

"Not for my money, Pete. Panty-waist my eye! Whatever else he is, whatever he may be up to, Layton is nothing like that. Don't make such a mistake about him."

"Says you? Got some inside stuff on him?"

"No. And I don't set up as infallible when it comes to reading character. I'm often wrong. Just say we don't see alike about Layton. He probably won't be with us long, anyhow. Skip him for now."

"Okay. He's skipped. What you got cooking?"

"You're going on the payroll as assistant-chief tomorrow, for one thing—"

"Whoops!"

"Patterson takes your old job," Parker went on. "Tomorrow morning," he continued, "you'll circulate the news among the foremen that plenty of track-men will be on the job by nightfall—"

"Where in hell are plenty trackmen coming from—out of a hat, or something?"

"Shut up, Pete. There's a jungle-camp full of them right at hand. Plenty trackers there. I saw them today. Now—I propose to get those men out of that camp and put them to work—"

"You going to send a gang in there to clean house on 'em?" gleefully. "How about me taking that—"

"And nobody hurt," Parker went on as though he hadn't been interrupted. "Connor's chaperones, Pete, sold us down the river. That's how that jungle-camp got filled up. You'll learn the truth of that later. Your job will be to circulate news of men arriving. That we have sent our own chaperones for them. Stress that, and not a word more than that. I'll do the rest. Got it straight?"

"Sure," said Pete. "But I don't understand—"

"You will later. Let's leave it there—and go to supper."

PARKER called "come in" to a light tap on the door. It opened and Eve entered. She had changed to some sort of thin summery dress which was several shades a lighter green than her eyes, and showed no sign of the depressed mood she had been in so short a time before. She looked, well—delicious.

Peter was on his feet instantly. "I'm Pete, beautiful," he got in ahead of a more formal introduction, "and you're happy to know me! If not right now, you will be. I got just one glimpse of you this afternoon—!"

"The redhead you spoke of this afternoon, Chief?" Eve inquired of Parker. "The one you said was so very susceptible to the feminine influence?"

"Hey!" Pete exclaimed. "Did he say—?"

"The one you said I could go riding with, only to be careful—?"

"Just a minute!" Pete yelped.

"That he'd be making passes at me before we even got started? He the one?"

"He's the one, Eve," Parker answered.

Pete began to laugh. "Damn right!" he declared. "The very identical one—and thanks, Chief, for the swell recommendation! Hey, Eve darling—when do we go riding? Tomorrow morning early—or maybe tonight? There's a moon!"

"A full-moon," Eve laughed at him. "And full-moons have a weird effect on me. Like dogs, I howl and bite when the moon is full. Better make it daylight—I'm telling you!" She spoke, then, to Parker.

"Mr. Hank Stanley sent you a message," she said. "If I happened to see you before supper, I was to tell you something. To prepare you for the worst, he said."

"Yeah?" Parker said wonderingly.

"I was to tell you that you'd guessed right about a Mr. Elias Bender. He's coming upriver from Lone Oak tonight."

"Hell!" Parker ejaculated, then, covering up, said:

"Reckon we'd all better put on our chain-mesh vests—and wear 'em day and night. In the meantime—what about supper?"

Even more than of Bender, Parker was thinking about Stevie as he followed Eve and Pete through the dining-room passage. And about Eve, too.

Stevie was getting dangerous. He'd be put away soon, undoubtedly. Should he tell Eve that?

Should he tell her that Stevie was the "bear" Hatfield said might have had hold of Hillyers?

That Stevie had turned killer?

For Stevie had, he knew.

IX

SUPPER at Headquarters was a far merrier affair that night than Parker had ever known it to be before. Eve was, of course, responsible for that. The one woman among a dozen more or less girl-starved men. Not only was she an enchanting eyefull, but she had wit, humor, and could give and take and ask no odds. In short, Eve was fun.

Parker, seeing her so seemingly carefree and happy, decided to say nothing to her about Stevie until he was certain the dim-wit had to be taken up and confined. That Stevie had mauled Hillyers to death and hidden his broken body in the brier-thicket, he was as certain as if he had seen him do it.

There could be no question about the unprovoked and murderous attack on Parker himself that afternoon.

Parker would have to turn Stevie in, if nobody else did. A harmless halfwit was one thing, a mental defective gone homicidal a very different matter. Stevie's intimate acquaintance with all the hidden jungle-trails, his proven ability to hide out successfully when he so desired, his tremendous physical strength, would render him far more a menace than any ordinary maniac would be. So Parker would have to act, if nobody else did.

If, of course, Stevie had really gone over the edge. And Parker thought he had.

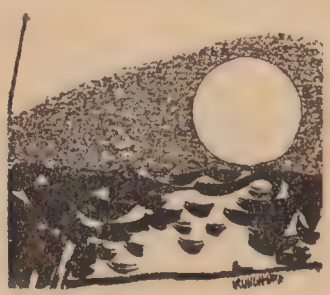
When the meal ended, Hank Stanley drew Parker aside and said, "Bob got that dope for you, Bill. You are right. St. Francis Navigation bought up all Ten-Ark's paper—and can you figure the angle on that?"

"Not yet—but Elias Bender's on his way

into the jungle. That's part of the answer. We'll just have to wait for the rest."

Parker loaded a pipe and strolled down a path which ended at riverside where a rough-board wharf extended for fifty feet out into the water. A number of river-craft were tied up alongside, but there was nowhere any activity. The moon was at full, and Parker liked being there in the quiet, looking out over the river. It was a relief from the swelter of the immediate jungle.

He sat on the edge of the wharf, smoked, and watched the river. It was, in his eyes, the one beautiful thing in all the jungle. The bankless St. Francis, glass-clear, padded with water-lilies, decorated with green moss, flags and myriad other water-loving plants. An unruly virago in flood, but just then lying as sweet as a new bride in her bed. And just about as lovely.



A long raft of logs, banjo-torches flaring on the bow, was feeling its way around a bend above, pushed slowly by a fiesty tug-boat.

Bits of conversation, laughter, drifted across the water. It was an outmoded method of moving logs, but Parker somehow found it homey, comforting—and a little bit sad.

Soon the important little tugs would be gone from the river. Their job, which they seemed actually to know about and to enjoy keenly their importance while pushing things around, would be gone. Would have been gone long ago, but for the almost insurmountable obstacles builders of railroads had to overcome to get steel stretching across the jungle. Well, Ten-Arks' road would take the logs right away from those impudent little tugs—and very soon at that.

A white, long-range bowlight picked Parker out against the background of trees and brush, and he glanced down the river. A launch was coming up. Probably one of St. Francis Navigation's boats going about its own concerns.

He got to thinking about St. Francis Navigation—and Elias Bender, its boss. What was St. Francis Navigation really playing for? Surely they knew that their river-business was doomed. If Ten-Ark's project fell through, and there wasn't a chance in a million that it would, some other project would promptly take its place. It could be only a matter of time. What, then, was St. Francis Navigation playing for?

Parker didn't know—yet. But he would have to find out.

When the up-river craft left the channel and headed for the wharf, Parker knew that Elias Bender was about to arrive. He wanted nothing to do with Bender that night. His had been a tough day, and tomorrow would be time enough.

He sat where he was, watching the medium-tall, compact figure of Bender as it merged with the shadows of the path, then resumed his watch on the river.

"Chief!"

Eve was almost within touching-reach of him, just as though she had materialized from among the clustering lily-pads. He motioned with a jerk of his head, and she came and sat on the wharf-stringer beside him.

"Taking the moonlight, as I am, or were you looking for me?" he asked, offering a lighted match for her cigarette.

"I saw you when you came," she answered, her eyes fixed on something distant over the river. "I had come out because I wanted to have quiet. To think and plan. When you came I slipped inside the *Bouncer's* cabin and hid."

WHEN she didn't continue, Parker said, "Hiding from me? You couldn't keep that sort of thing up, you know. But maybe you have decided to leave. Go back where you came from. Have you?"

"No. I'm not going back. I think you know quite well that it was not jungle-lure that brought me here. I had a reason for coming. I have a reason for staying on."

"You can't do that. Not stay here and work for me. Unless, Eve, you quit lying to me."

She was silent for a moment, then said: "When somebody asks questions about

things which are no business of theirs, is it lying to evade?"

"Lying to escape consequences is cowardly. My sins are pretty much like those sands of the sea—but damned if the sin of cowardice is among them. I don't like cowards."

"You regard cowardice as a sin?"

"Yes—taken with all its implications. Such as, for instance, yielding under pressure when somebody you're afraid of orders you to do a rotten thing. But, damn it, I'm not a preacher. Suppose we just sit here and look at the river, not talking at all?"

"But I want to talk," Eve objected. "I want you to know that you are wrong about me. About my intentions. You probed me with questions this afternoon, and all but one of them were questions you had no right to ask. When you accused me of coming here to help somebody cross up the job, I denied it. And I told the truth. I answered the others with lies or evasions. If you care to know it—I don't give one single little damn about your job, one way or the other. I'm not a menace to it—and that's all you need to know. The rest is none of your business."

"You might have ticked me off like that this afternoon. Why didn't you?"

"You wouldn't have believed me. You don't believe me now. I said you wouldn't be interested in a denial without proof—and you aren't!"

ANOTHER log-raft was coming down the river, a busy little tugboat puffing importantly behind it. Both watched it, while a silence lay between them. Parker broke it.

"It is not important, Eve," he said, "that you understand how I feel about this job, any job, that I'm on. But understanding that would enable you to understand my attitude toward you. I haven't spent five years of my life battling the heat, the muck, the rotten stink of the jungles for the money there is in it. There isn't any. No laurels to be garnered either. There's nothing at all to hold me—but the job. An enemy to my job is an enemy to me—and this job has enemies. I classed you as one, and a menace is a menace, whether it wears pants or skirts. Try to get that angle, will you?"

"I have got it," Eve answered almost passionately. "Something, or someone, outside of oneself can be so important that it becomes really a part of one. Do you think I don't know that?"

"Suppose I answer that by saying that I believe what you have told me tonight? That I shall not probe you with questions again. I know, of course, that there's somebody in the jungles whose presence here is the occasion of your own—and I might even know who that person is. Think I know, at any rate. But let's leave it like this: If you should decide at any time to tell me what's troubling you, making you unhappy, please do. I'll help you, if I can. Okay by you?"

"Very much okay—and thank you!"

THE silence of the moonlit wharf was broken thunderously by the thud of heavy, rushing feet. A huge body was hurtling across the rough boards from the jungles edge on the right, going arrow-straight for the opposite cover. Another runner crashed out of the brush and onto the wharf, shouting as he ran:

"Stop! Stop before I shoot!"

Parker, who had got to his feet instantly, neatly sidestepped Stevie—but collided head-on with his pursuer. Both swore hotly—and went down together in a tangle.

"You done that on purpose!" Sheriff Hatfield roared, sitting up on the wharf and getting his breath in gulps. "Damn you, Parker—you got in my way a-purpose—!"

"I'd sooner have got in the way of a locomotive, and a Mogul at that!" Parker interrupted fiercely, sitting up and feeling a shoulder with exploring fingers. "What you mean I got in your way? You got in mine, Hatfield—and if you've busted this shoulder I damn well will sue the county!"

Hatfield scrambled to his feet, retrieved and holstered his revolver. He swore bitter oaths, rolled up a trousers-leg—and swore more bitter oaths. "My right leg's skun plumb from ankle-bone to knee-cap—and you done it a-purpose! You kicked that leg out from under me—and I'm strongly notioned to take you down-river and lock you up! That's what. Lock you up!"

"That'll make two suits!" Parker railed at him. "Personal injury and false arrest. Maybe even malicious prosecution, defamation of character and unwarranted agony of mind, plus crushing my spirit and sham-

ing me in the eyes of my friends—if any—and!"

"Go to hell—and stay there!" Hatfield shouted, turned and limped up the path toward the clubhouse.

"Did—did it really hurt your shoulder?"

Parker, shaking all over with laughter, turned to answer—choked up again, and finally managed, "No, Eve, not a hurt. You see, I expected it—"

"Then you did do it on purpose?"

"Well—what do you think?"

"To save Stevie?"

"You don't think I let that husky run into me just for the fun of exasperating him, surely? To save Stevie—of course."

"The sheriff was after Stevie—threatening to shoot! Oh!" Eve's face was white in the moonlight, and her eyes were wide with apprehension. "Because he attacked you today?"

"No. Hatfield couldn't have known about that. Eve—I'm afraid the sheriff is after him for something far more serious."

"Tell me," she begged, almost whispering it.

"They found a dead man today. Did you hear about it?"

"Yes. A man named Hillyers. But—but what has that to do with Stevie?"

"Hatfield reached a conclusion, Eve, that I had already reached," he told her as gently as he could. "That Stevie killed Hillyers—"

"No! Oh, no—he wouldn't! He wouldn't, I tell you!"

Eve was suddenly in his arms, clinging to him, face against his shoulder, sobbing. He waited. Presently the sobbing subsided, and he spoke. "Hadn't you better tell me about it, Eve?"

"Stevie," she said, her voice muffled against his coat, "is my brother!"

X

EVE'S revelation relieved a tension in Parker that he hadn't known was there. He hadn't realized just how much he wanted to see Eve in a better light, until she had herself dispelled the shadows for him. He realized it then.

Eve's story was simple and uninvolved. She told it while they sat on the stringer together.

"I was three years old and Stevie seven," she told him, "when Stevie fell down the stairway of our house in Memphis. His head was badly injured. Rance Layton, then about fourteen, was visiting there, Captain Layton and my father having been friends and business associates for many years. Stevie, when he was well enough to talk, said that Rance had shoved him, causing the fall. Rance denied it.

Stevie soon quit talking about it at all, seeming to have forgotten. The doctors found, later, that his mind has ceased to develop. He would always be mentally about seven or eight years old.

"Our mother died when Stevie was twelve, and I suppose he ran a bit wild. One day a playmate was shot and killed by a pistol one of the boys had stolen from his father—and the blame was laid on Stevie. In spite of Father's influence, there was strong talk of committing Stevie to an asylum, where he would be confined for life. I'm vague here," she went on, trying to recall past events, "but I remember that Captain Layton came to our house one night—and the next day Stevie was gone. Father told me only that the captain had taken him away where he could be free and happy, and I was not to tell anybody at all about it.

"Captain Layton became Stevie's guardian when Father died, three years later, and an aunt became mine. Father's estate consisted almost entirely of timberlands, and those lands are located right in here. He and Seth Layton bought heavily in this part of the Sunken Lands. But there was not a great deal of actual money. So I became a stenographer, later a secretary. When Captain Layton died Rance became guardian of Stevie and custodian of his half of the estate, Stevie being an incompetent. I had not seen Stevie from the day Captain Layton took him away until I saw him in your office this morning—and he doesn't know who I am.

"Rance was working for Ten-Ark when I went there, as I have told you, and we renewed our old acquaintance. He told me that Stevie had shown signs lately of turning violent, and that he hardly knew what to do. Later he informed me that he was going to sell Stevie's holdings in the Sunken Lands, reinvest the money to provide an income—and have Stevie put away. I begged him not to do that, and he finally made a proposition.

If I'd marry him and help him take care of Stevie, he'd never put him away. I know why Rance wanted me to marry him. I have title to fifty thousand acres of timberland here—and the new railroad will enhance its value greatly. He wants that. I refused—and then he hinted from time to time that Stevie would be made to suffer for it.

"And that's all, Chief. Except that the chance came to work for Stanleys and I took it. I will be of age, twenty-one, two months from now—and I mean to take Stevie out of Rance's hands. I knew Rance was going—and that made me afraid. Now Stevie is in trouble—and I don't know what to do. Confinement will kill him, and I know it. But if he has become a homicidal maniac—I—I guess that will have to be done!"

"Do you think Rance actually pushed Stevie down those stairs?" Parker asked.

"I think he did and that Captain Seth knew it. At least he believed it. That is probably why he took Stevie and gave him a chance to live free. But the truth won't ever be known about it."

"Rance denied that Stevie had property. Know his reason?"

"He doesn't want outsiders interested. Insisted that I keep quiet—and I have, until now. I think he intends something crooked about Stevie's land."

PARKER nodded. "He said tonight that he had the means of bringing Stevie to time if he got stubborn. If Stevie is afraid of Rance, then that may explain his attack on me. And—that reminds me. Stevie quit cold when he heard your voice, yet he doesn't know you. I wonder about that?"

"My father always said that my voice was so much like my mother's that it actually haunted him. Could Stevie have remembered her voice, do you think?"

"I think you've got it, Eve. Aroused something asleep in his mind. That could and probably does account for it. Now, about Stevie. He'll probably hide out in the jungle. I'll try and find him. Then something will have to be done about him. But whatever is done must be just. We won't stand for anything else. Bedtime now. Ready?"

"Yes," Eve responded as Parker helped her to her feet. "And I feel lots better now, Chief. Thanks millions!"

XI

IN COMMON with the furred and feathered dwellers in the jungles, Parker possessed the faculty of going to sleep instantly and at will, to awake at the slightest unusual sound, and to come up wide-eyed and clear-headed in the morning.

Next morning, he got the day's work going, ate breakfast and went into Hank Stanley's office. He wanted to find out about Bender, although his knowledge of the wily head of St. Francis Navigation assured him in advance that a session with him would be only negatively informative. Bender's real intention would be covered up in words which meant exactly nothing.

Elias Bender did not look at all formidable. He was a stocky man of about forty-five, average in height and dark of complexion. His hair was graying at the temples, and coal-black, bushy eyebrows almost concealed his well-caverned, surprisingly friendly black eyes. He was clean-shaved and his wide mouth, above a square chin, looked as though it would open in a smile or hearty laugh at the drop of a hat—and the owner of the mouth would gladly drop the hat himself, if nobody else did. He was witty, a good conversationalist and sharp as a razor.

Bender greeted Parker with the cordial heartiness of an old and trusted friend, and Parker was not remiss on his part. They were acquaintances of long standing—and each accurately evaluated the other.

A game was about to be played—and both knew it wouldn't be for marbles.

"Bill," said Bender after they had settled down with cigars going, "I'll bet you're wondering a lot about what brought Old Man Bender up the river, and Hank is, too. That right?" he chuckled, eyes twinkling with good humor.

"You probably came to look us over, Lias," Parker retorted with equal good humor, "and see how long it will be before Navigation starts warbling its swan-song. Well—it won't be long now."

"Hey, Bill!" Bender protested. "That's too near the truth for joking!"

"Bill's all right, Lias," Stanley grinned. "No harm in him. Just likes his little bit of fun as he goes along. Guess he did poke you in a tender spot at that, didn't he?"

"As a matter of fact," Bender said in contradiction, "Ten-Ark's railroad may prove to be the best thing that ever happened to Navigation. That's a fact. May as well let you fellows in on it, seeing there's no longer any need for secrecy. We saw the handwriting on the wall, folks, a long time ago—and we got ready."

He paused for dramatic emphasis, then fired his first gun.

"Navigation is throwing in with Ten-Ark!"

Neither Stanley nor Parker looked surprised. Neither made comment. Bender, unabashed, continued.

"Here's how we propose to do it—and you'll agree we've been smart," he boasted. "Navigation saw, a long time back, that it stood to lose not just its shirt-tail but its whole shirt—unless it could take advantage of that little jerkwater railroad Ten-Ark sprung on us. River-logging was doomed, and we had lived by river-logging all our long and profitable lives. We wanted badly to go on living profitably, and we're going to do it—but not as we have been doing. Here's the dope—in a nutshell:

"We have bought up a whale of a lot of cut-over land hereabouts, and optioned a whale of a lot more. We now propose to bring farmers in here, and make corn and cotton grow where only trees and buckbrush have grown before. We're going to colonize proper. Now—does that proposition look like a winner to you?"

Hank waited for Parker to answer, if he chose to. Parker said:

"We wouldn't be interested in colonizing farmers."

"Hah! That's where Stanley Brothers cash in!" Bender declared in much the same way one might say: You win the first prize!

"Show us," Parker requested.

"The St. Francis River will have to have a levee. No farms here unless it does have. The Stanleys pick up that juicy contract—and it will be a cost-plus one, at that," significantly. "Oughta be—say, quarter-million velvet, no less. Your outfit is right here on the job, which is a big item. Does it look good to you?"

He sat back, an expectant expression on his face.

Again Hank waited for his engineer to speak.

"No," Parker answered. "Anything but good."

"Now, look, Bill!" Bender protested, sitting forward. "You don't want to thumb this down without first looking into it in all details—"

"I can see from where I sit," Parker interrupted, "that the scheme is a bloomer. Such a levee would require an army of skinners and muckers, and more little bronc-mules than have been foaled since the Boston Tea Party. It would take us at least three years to do the job and only Government could afford it. The cost to St. Francis Navigation would be prohibitive."

"St. Francis Navigation will take care of the cost," Bender pointed out. "You folks will get a big chunk of money out of it. You can't lose—"

"But St. Francis Navigation can lose—and would lose," Parker cut in. "St. Francis Navigation must be well aware of that."

"If that's so, then why in God's name would we propose it?" Bender, now on the edge of his chair, demanded.

"Yes—why?" Parker asked, fixing cold eyes on Bender.

"Because, damn it, we want the levee! We want farmers in here. It's the country's biggest colonization project. There's big money in it!"

"Can you guarantee your farmers that the Mississippi River will respect your puny little mud-bank contraption and not romp in and wash it to hell and gone? Can St. Francis Navigation do that?"

"We're not talking about the Mississippi—" Bender started spluttering.

"I am. Any engineer worth his degree will tell you what I'm telling you—and I'm not charging a damned cent for it," Parker interrupted. "The Mississippi River is our close neighbor, and until it is harnessed in such a way that it will never again breach its levee and spread destruction all over the Sunken Lands, the St. Francis levee can't be built that will afford any more protection than would a rail-fence—and it down. And—you know it."

"Damn the Mississippi!" Bender snapped. "What the dirt-farmers don't know won't hurt them—!"

"Until it's too late for them to do anything about it," Hank Stanley put in.

"St. Francis Navigation isn't bothering

about farmers, Hank," Parker told him. "They don't figure in this—and won't. That isn't the game at all—eh, Bender?"

"Answer me a question!" Bender demanded, ignoring Parker's challenge. "If a levee wouldn't stand against a Mississippi flood, then what about your railroad dump? It's a dirt-job, remember!"

"It wouldn't," Parker explained patiently, "but for the fact that we have left so many trestles, water-gates, in the dump that the dump won't offer any obstruction. But—you can't scatter breaks in a levee, and have a levee. That's just simple ABC."

"So you're thumbing the proposition down, are you?" Bender queried. "I'm to take that answer back to St. Francis Navigation?"

"We're thumbing it down," Hank Stanley told him. "And you can suit yourself about taking back the answer."

"Absolutely final, is it?"

PARKER'S look checked that decision up to Stanley. Hank nodded, said, "Yeah, Bender. That's final."

Bender looked at Stanley, at Parker—and the beginning of a grin heralded the chuckle coming after. "Hickory-heads, both of you!" he declared, reaching for the whiskey. "Don't know a good thing when you see it—and damned if I expected you would, for that matter. Well, no harm in giving you the chance—the chance of your business-life, Hank, I'll tell you—and no hard feelings. Thanks for your overnight hospitality, and if you'll lend me a horse I'll ride along to Layton's. Okay by that?"

"Sure," Hank said. "Stay here, Lias, as long as you like—if, that is, you're stopping for a while in the jungles?"

"Dickering to buy Rance Layton's interests over on Big Caney, Hank," Bender answered cheerily. "Want to check his stumpage."

"I see," Parker put in. "Navigation wants timber as well as cut-over stuff. Going to farm that land, too?"

"Going to let Ten-Ark's railroad haul some logs for us, seeing Ten-Ark's going into the logging business," Bender replied, and winked companionably. "Thanks for the horse. I'll be riding!"

"Well," Hank asked, after downing two double-tyes close together when Bender departed, "did that polecat tip you to anything, while he was making us a preposterous proposition—and laughing while he did it?"

"Plenty crusty, eh?" Parker grinned. Then he sobered. "I got one thing pretty clearly, Hank. Bender is so certain the end of the game will find all the chips on his side of the table that he isn't taking the trouble to fool us. He said in effect: I've come in here to break up your little play-house—and what in hell are you going to do about it? Yeah, Hank, he's cocky—and dangerous."

"Just accept my statement that I know he's dangerous, Bill, and give me the dope on his game as you see it—or do you see it?"

Maybe I can give you a brief squint at it," Parker told him. "Rance Layton is playing ball with Bender. That's why he got in with Ten-Ark. Navigation knew well in advance about T-A's plans for a railroad, through Layton. Navigation started scheming. And the result is that Navigation now holds enough of Ten-Ark's paper to close Ten-Ark out—if the railroad should fail them. If Ten-Ark can't take up its paper—then somebody will take up Ten-Ark. See it? Pretty clear, isn't it?"

"I do—now!" Hank exclaimed, his eyes clouding. "Ought to have got it the minute you started talking about Bob getting the dope on Ten-Ark's paper for you. The railroad is Ten-Ark's lifeline. But—hell's bells, Bill, that means Bender—"

"Exactly. Bender has already set in motion a neat little game of sabotage. Not to destroy the railroad outright, of course. That would be too dangerous to attempt. A delaying game, Hank, I'm thinking. If he can delay us so that the fall rains will catch us with a naked dump, unprotected by steel and ballast—"

"By God!" Hank interrupted savagely. "That's it! If the rains catch us with our pants down, then Ten-Ark's railroad dump will be just nothing but a lot of mud—maybe washed away entirely. Why—that dirty, lousy, thieving—!"

"All of that—and more," Parker agreed. "But searching the thesaurus for a word to fit Bender properly, Hank, won't get it. I think I'll take a ride myself," he decided, getting up and pouring a drink. "Here's luck to Bender—all of it bad!"

Parker went out to the stables, mounted and rode off down the right-of-way.

XII

"WHOA up, you!"

Parker reined in automatically.

" 'Morning, Sheriff," he greeted Hatfield, who sat a hammerheaded claybank on the right-of-way. "What can I do for you?"

Hatfield's still eyes had a look the opposite of benevolent.

"Trouble is, Parker, I wouldn't be willing to swear you done it on purpose," he said doubtingly. "If I was, danged if you wouldn't be in the jailhouse right this minnit. Obstructing an officer, you'd ought to know, is plumb serious!"

"Well—say, Hatfield, are you still harping on that run-in we had last night?" Parker's astonishment seemed entirely genuine. "I see you are—and let me advise you not to go swearing to things too hastily. You obstructed me, as a matter of fact, and I'm so busted up this morning I can hardly sit in my saddle. You swear against me! Hell, I like that!"

"Well," Hatfield told him, "I reckon I'll forget it—this one time. Not again, though—so take fair warning. What I really wanted to ask you about is where at you figger Stevie could be hiding out. Got any ideas?"

"No. None definite. He could be just anywhere, Sheriff. He knows plenty places. Why so hot after Stevie? What's he done?"

"Don't know for sure as he done it," Hatfield replied. "But who else hereabouts besides him could of busted Hillyers up like he was?"

"You're not sure Stevie did it—yet you threatened to shoot him last night?" Parker was astounded.

"I didn't. I just threatened to shoot. 'Course I wouldn't of shot to hit. Rance agrees that if we catch Stevie up, he'll be responsible for keeping him up. Leastways, until we make sure he did bust Hillyers up or didn't. If he did—well that's another matter. Allowed I'd let you know about it, and maybe you'd sorta keep a lookout for him. If he's a killer he ought'n be let run loose."

"Right you are, Sheriff," Parker agreed, lifting his reins. "And I'll cooperate with you. By the way, how do I figure as a murder-suspect this morning? Still got me tagged?"

"Still trying to make up my mind about you, Parker," Hatfield allowed, frowning. "And that skun right leg of mine is right now setting me against you. You hadn't ought to of done that, and you know it. On purpose, too. Well, be seeing you."

Parker rode on, turned off the right-of-way and followed a jungle-trail in a westerly direction. He was going to call on Rance Layton. Layton hadn't showed up on the job that morning, if he needed an excuse for calling.

Hatfield had given him something to think about. So Rance would guarantee to keep Stevie where he couldn't harm anybody? That meant that he'd lock Stevie up when he got the opportunity, and no doubt he had some sort of room strongly enough fortified to hold him.

Rance's aim in that direction was plain to see. With Stevie confined, due to go to an asylum if Rance gave the word, he'd be holding a nice, big club over Eve. And that, Parker believed, accounted for all the fuss about Stevie.

He rode on for a distance of two miles, then got down, hitched off the trail and went forward on foot. He wanted to do a bit of reconnoitering before he rode across Big Caney.

He came to where a wooden approach made a slight lift to the end of a railed bridge spanning two-hundred-foot-wide Big Caney Slough—and took his first look at Old Cap Layton's much talked of crazy-house.

The railroads had forced the old Captain off the river, but they hadn't taken the kind of house he loved away from him.

A grassy clearing of perhaps an acre in extent, dotted here and there with water-oaks, lay directly across Caney. An elevated boardwalk led from the far end of the bridge across the clearing and ended at the veranda of surely the queerest dwelling the engineer had ever laid eyes on.

DINGY under once-white paint, the house presented the appearance of a three-decker steamboat. A steamboat built with its hull on piling. The front veranda was the boat's foredeck, and the designer

had carried out the steamboat idea in every detail. Guard-rails, mud-guards, freight-deck, boiler-deck, cabin-deck, and, topping the three decks off, a pilot-house in just the place where a pilot-house should be.

A wire, passed through staples on the bridge-railing and ending at a padlocked gate which efficiently closed the bridge to chance traffic, engaged Parker's attention. There was a rope loop on the end of the wire, and callers were obviously expected to take hold of it and pull.

A dun-colored horse belonging in Stanley stables stood hitched near the steamboat house. Bender had already pulled the wire and been admitted. Parker decided he might as well follow Bender's example, and then follow Bender. He reached for the loop and reconsidered.

A fox-squirrel had been chattering in a tree back of the engineer and beside the trail. Chattering just to be chattering. Now the squirrel was fussing. Something had disturbed it, and the little animal would not bother its head about another animal. He was fussing at a human.

Parker slid into the brush quickly, made a hole in the foliage and watched. A horse approached, flashed by and was drawn up quickly before the padlocked gate. The rider dismounted, walked to the gate and pulled the loop. A rider Parker had not expected to find calling on Rance Layton.

The rider was Eve—and she had come there in a hurry.

Parker made no bones about spying on her. If her hands were clean, as he had believed them to be last night, spying wouldn't hurt her. If they were not—then spying was justifiable. He stayed in the brush.

When Eve pulled the rope-loop, strokes of a deep-toned bell in the steamboat's pilot-house responded. Almost immediately the door beyond the fore-deck opened and Rance Layton came out. He looked beyond the bridge, then walked leisurely across it, put a key in the padlock and swung the gate open.

"Convenient little gadgets, telephones, aren't they?" he said mockingly as Eve led her horse onto the deck of the bridge. "And how sweet of you to come so promptly!"

Eve remounted, making no reply, and rode across. Layton followed. She tied beside Bender's dun, then followed Rance into the house, the door closing behind them.

"So," Parker reflected as he walked back to where his horse was tied, "she came in answer to a telephoned message from Layton. Might have been about Stevie. Probably was—but, damn it to hell, I don't like it!"

He mounted and rode slowly back toward the right-of-way, his mood sombre. The depression of the jungle was nagging at him, and he wished he could haul off and slap the crowding green walls to hell and gone out of existence. At least, so far apart they could never again come together. What a loathsome, filthy, lousy thing—the jungle. And damned jungle! And this particular one—it was worse than all the others he had known put together.

Trees. Giants and pygmys. Standing always in closed ranks, boughs interlaced to cheat the soil of sunlight. Buckbrush, sumac, hazel, tearblanket, thorny blackberry, every sort of undergrowth that loved sour earth and darkness—all laced together with vines which massed them solidly into smothering walls.

And clinging muck and stagnant, poisonous water everywhere!

"I'll be long gone, jungle!" he shouted jeeringly. "I'm leaving you behind as soon as this job is done! Damn you to hell, anyhow!"

XIII

A WEEK followed during which nothing disturbing happened. No news came to Parker's ears about Stevie, and Eve, since the moonlit night when she had given Parker her confidence, was oddly restrained, reticent, when with him. He asked her once if she had had any news and her answer was a brief no. So he said no more about Stevie.

Eve went horseback-riding when she had the chance, but the work at Headquarters was heavy and she didn't shirk it. She rode with various men on the staff, often with Pete Sanders—but not with Parker. For one thing, Parker never asked her.

Occasionally, as Parker knew, she rode alone. He had no doubt that when she did so she went to the steamboat-house. So he was not long in coming to the conclusion

that she was seeing Stevie. Rance had found the dim-wit and was keeping him under restraint, but allowing Eve to visit him. That was how Parker figured it—and for some reason he couldn't fathom, Eve had told him nothing of it.

Rance Layton sent word, two days after he had been told to report on the job, that he had suffered an attack of malarial fever, and didn't know when he'd be able to report.

"Tell him I'm sorry to hear it," Parker had sent word in reply. "That maybe the air of the jungle might not be good for him. It surely is poison to some people."

As the engineer had predicted, when news of the pending arrival of a big shipment of steel-men on the job penetrated to Blinker's jungle camp, which it did by rapid grapevine, the camp was promptly deserted by its hold-outs. They swarmed into the three camps along the right-of-way, suddenly work-ways. Even eager.

"As soon as they heard that," Peter reported, "they knew nobody would be paying them wages to stay in the jungle, as somebody had been. No wages, no stay. They got work-brickle as hell right now—and, boy! are they working!"

Sheriff Hatfield stayed away, much to Harper's satisfaction. Maybe his "skun" leg was giving him trouble, or he'd just gone off fishing. In either case Parker gladly spared him.

The potential storm Riley had called up to worry Parker with materialized, and a light spattering of rain was all the Sunken Lands got of it. But—it was a warning. If the warning proved to be not too close in the van of what it warned of, Ten-Ark's railroad would soon be running log-trains in and out of the jungle. Ten-Ark wouldn't have anything at all to worry about.

But—Bender wouldn't be relying on anything so unstable as the weather, just hoping the Fall rains would sweep in ahead of schedule and put a crimp in the job for him. Too uncertain for the efficient Bender. He knew as well as Parker how vulnerable the job was at the moment, and he would attempt something calculated to keep it vulnerable until the rains came and wrecked it altogether.

Thanks to a bit of good strategy, the job had plenty of men now, and Parker had no worry about that. So he drove the job early and late, keeping one eye out for Bender and the other on the weather. Both the weather and Bender was uncertain.

AT THE beginning of the second week, Parker knew for sure that the rains had really set in over the Upper Mississippi watershed—and that meant a rising Mississippi. Those rains had come early, and that might or might not be significant. Parker drove the dirt job to a finish, then set all hands to laying track, ballasting, strengthening the weak spots in the embankment.

Ten miles of roadbed yet to ballast and surface—and five miles, the final five, absolutely naked. Bender's jungle camp holdout had delayed the job materially, and there was no denying the fact. The situation was enough to give contractor and engineers the jitters.

Under the push and drive of competent foremen, steel was reaching out almost magically—and still Bender did nothing. The entire line was under patrol by guards with rifles. That was what Bender would have expected and endeavored to discount. And when the beginning of the third week was at hand, Parker knew just about what Bender was cooking.

He would wait until the St. Francis, swollen by her tributaries and the first rains of Fall, sent her surplus water out into the jungles—then he'd strike once. And—once, as he saw it, would be plenty.

Parker doubled the number of picked men assigned to guard duty—and kept right on laying steel, ballasting and surfacing, counting every finished yard as so much more insurance against rain, Bender—and disaster.

One midnight in the middle of the third week it rained. Not much to start with. It fell slowly, at first, pattering on the dry, baked leaves of the jungle like millions of tiny-footed gnomes romping on a silken coverlet. Before morning the tiny-footed gnomes were more like heavy-footed cattle, and the romping a mad, thundering stampede.

All day the rain kept up, falling with a dreary steadiness that discouraged all on the job except the little rabbit mules. They stayed in the corrals and loved it. Work came to a stop. The best thing to do about

a rain-softened virgin railroad embankment is to do nothing, so nothing was done.

No rain the next day, and the morning brought a sun warm enough to dry the job out. There would be work tomorrow—if no more rain fell before then.

When Parker went to his room to clean up for supper that night, he found that Eve had been there during the day and left a note for him. It was lying on his dresser, and read:

Chief:
Please meet me on the wharf directly after supper. *Eve.*

The note made the engineer thoughtful. He had wanted all along to help Eve, and he had wanted her confidence. That she was under a strain he knew just by looking at her. It betrayed itself in many ways. She was nervous, distrait, and her eyes, seldom bright with laughter now, had shadows beneath them. Eve was sick with worry and apprehension—and she persisted in withholding the reason for it.

Layton was causing Eve's unhappiness. Layton and Stevie. Of that Parker was certain. But there was nothing he could do about it, even if the job had not demanded every moment of his time, every effort of his mind.

Layton had the whiphand in the matter of Stevie, and he was using that fact to force Eve into doing something he wished, and which would result in self-loathing for her if she did. Marry, him possibly, else place her large timber interests in his hands as the courts had already done in the case of Stevie.

TREES, with the coming of the railroad, had become almost green shafts of gold. Layton had many, but he wanted many more.

The moon might have been the slice of cantaloup it looked like, insofar as any real light it shed was concerned. Palely yellow, harrassed by drifts of filmly cloud-wrack, its effulgence was like flat yellow paint against an absorbent wall.

There was barely light enough for Parker to see Eve when she came down the path and onto the wharf. He met her and walked with her to the stringer on which they had sat before. She sat down, and began talking at once. Talking as though against time.

"I have been seeing Stevie almost at will," she told him. "Rance has him locked in a room on the cabin deck of the steamboat house. No window. Just a round port too small for him to get through, and the door is too heavy for even Stevie's strength. I think Stevie wouldn't try so very hard to get out, for that matter. I have found out that he is desperately afraid of Rance. You will recall that I told you Stevie said that Rance had shoved him down the stairs and hurt his head?"

PARKER nodded. "I recall it," he said. "Could it be possible that Stevie's childish mind established a fear-complex at that time which has remained with him ever since? Active at sight of Rance? I do not know anything at all about such things, but if that is possible it would explain why Stevie, fearing nothing else and nobody in the world, should become positively abject under the influence of Rance. Could that be, do you think?"

Parker considered that for a moment, then said, "I think it is good psychology, Eve. Psychiatrists have proved that fear-psychoses can be established in the mind of a child at any given moment after the child reaches the age of remembering and the mind receives distinct impressions, and may remain in the mind even after the child has forgotten the occasion. If Rance purposely shoved Stevie and caused a fall which resulted in a painful injury, then nothing is more likely than that Stevie, still mentally the same child he was at the time, should thereafter associate Rance in his mind with the sensation of pain, agony—and that would establish fear. I'm not learned in those things, Eve, but I think you may be right. So Stevie stands in terror of Rance. First I knew about it."

"Yes. A child's fear of someone from whose authority there is no escape and who can and will punish painfully if not obeyed. Stevie knows now that I am his sister, and he is pleased over it, but he can't possibly realize exactly what the relationship is. He is glad when I come, very gentle with me, and I think in time I might become very dear to him. He has given me his confidence, too, to some extent, and bit by bit has

revealed things to me which it's important for you to know."

"You've avoided me these past three weeks. Don't think I haven't felt that keenly. I have. I think I understand now why you did. Rance's influence, isn't it?"

"Yes. So long as he has the power to send Stevie into confinement for life, which would mean his early death, I'm not a free agent. Let me tell you, though, the things Stevie has told me, then I'll put my present problem up to you.

"Stevie saw Hillyers running away from the scene of the explosion which killed Radley and Jelks, and he ran after him and overtook him. As best I can get at what was then in his mind, he knew that Hillyers had done something destructive to Billy's railroad. It's your railroad, remember, so far as Stevie is concerned. Whether he meant to do it or not, Chief, nobody will ever know—but he did crush Hillyers to death. 'All of a sudden he wasn't living any more!' I think that surprised Stevie very much—and that he had had no murderous thoughts in his mind. But there you are.

"Hillyers had reached that dynamite-log in the clearing, probably to hide his battery-box there, when Stevie caught him. So Stevie saw the dynamite. Why he carried the body away from there and hid it in the thicket only Stevie knows. But he did. Rance, like you, suspected Stevie—and he knew where the body was long before Hatfield did. It was at his order and under the impulsion of fear that Stevie got you to the dynamite-log—and Rance appeared with the sheriff in tow—"

"The damned rat! That would help pin the murder of Radley and Jelks on me—as he thought. Rance's own little killing, by way of Hillyers. All right, Eve. Go ahead. This is interesting me."

"It should. Stevie was set on to attack you, kill you if he could, and that was Rance's work, too. Stevie is fond of you—but he is terrified at the very sight of Rance—"

"I'm not blaming Stevie, Eve," Parker assured her hastily. "Don't think it!"

"I know you don't blame Stevie," Eve said gratefully. "You sympathize with him—!"

"And with you. Tell me—what's Rance's point in all this? Still trying to force a marital union between himself and your timber acreage?"

Eve's eyes flashed fiercely. "After I finished telling him just how he rated with me, Chief, he decided my timber wouldn't be worth the price of marriage to me. I can almost feel shame over the things I said. But that's past, and you want to know what he proposes now. He demands an option on my land—"

"Nonsense, Eve! You're not legally competent to give one. How does he propose to get around that?"

"I'll be of legal age in one month," she told him. "The option will be dated ahead past that date—and he'll hold Stevie where he is, so I won't repudiate it, until he has sold the lands under the option. Then he'll turn Stevie over to me. Quite simple, isn't it—and fiendish. The law is with him as to Stevie. So—what am I to do?"

"Give him the option, of course. Any sale he makes under it would kick back on him—probably kick him right into the big house. It wouldn't stand—after you had sworn to how it was obtained. Is Lance so dumb he'd take that chance?"

"He thinks I am. Anyhow, he'll settle for that. And you advise me to give it?"

"As freely as you'd give him a piece of old newspaper! Where's Bender, that he hasn't figured out a better scheme than that?"

"He comes and goes, I think. And so far as I know, Rance hasn't consulted him about his designs on me. I don't know what Rance and Bender are planning to do, Chief, but you can bet they've got plans."

"Of course. Any suspicious persons coming and going, Eve?"

"No one at all, that I've seen."

Parker laughed. "Hillyers got Radley, a man who was playing along with them, when he was ordered to get me—so now they are going to do their own dirty work, whatever it is. Don't blame them. I would, too. Now a suggestion, Eve. Go to the steamboat house as often as you wish—before you become of age. Don't go near there afterward—until Rance uses the option, and then take the law with you. Will you do as I say? Blindly, Eve—and no questions asked?"

"Yes," she answered in a low voice. "Yes, Chief, I'll do just as you say."

They went back up the path together. Eve's spirits had seemed to revive and her face had color. She said goodnight at the door of her room, and Parker went into his office.

The only way in which Rance Layton could use that fore-dated option, Parker knew, would be to make sure beforehand that Eve would never appear to repudiate it, so—

Eve would be safe from him until the day she came of age—and not one day thereafter.

XIV

WITH the dirt job completed and the final section of the railroad embankment at grade and ready for ties and steel, the race toward completion was at full swing. Parker's crew of over four hundred men worked every day from dawn until dark.

There had, at the end of two more weeks, been no heavy rainfall on the job, but, due to torrential and frequent rains in the north and a swollen Mississippi River, the normally ice-clear St. Francis became mud-colored and threatening, pushing her surplus water out across the jungle where the tide was rising slowly up the east slope of the embankment. That would not in itself damage the job, but it did make carrying on the work difficult. But the job kept going forward.

Parker saw but little of Eve during those two weeks, as all his time was spent out on the work, but since she had not sought him out he felt sure there had been no change in the steamboat-house situation. One bit of information, though, she had passed along to him one evening after supper.

Bender had stayed continuously at the steamboat house since the St. Francis began rising. He and Rance appeared to be only loafing, and Eve had not at any time heard them discussing any plans they might be laying. There had been no visitors at the place, so far as Eve had seen.

There wouldn't be, Parker thought. Whatever Bender and Layton did to put a crimp in the railroad would be done with no outside help—and therefore without witnesses. Should their scheme succeed they, although suspected strongly, would be safe against any legal action. Trust Bender for that.

The news which Parker had been fearing all along he would be hearing, came a few minutes after midnight in the middle of the third week.

The engineer, asleep with the telephone almost in his bunk with him, heard the first startling jingle of the bell. Sleepiness vanished as he snatched up the receiver.

"Holmes speaking, Chief!" It was Stanleys' Barfield Point lookout on the Mississippi—and his message was brief, but stunning. "It's come, Chief. The Mississippi has gone out!"

Parker rolled out, dressed and routed out every available man. The rest of that night and most of the day was spent reinforcing the raw dump with cement bags filled with earth, and the engineer ordered that all the mules, more than four hundred, be put on top of the embankment before nightfall. He and Pete Sanders rode the dump with wary eyes searching for any spot in it which needed attention. On the whole, things did not look so bad.

Both men knew that the time of proving Parker's wisdom about those four extra flood-gates, over which he and Radley had fought their bitterest battles, was at hand. If Parker had been right, the embankment well might stand. If wrong—well, that would be that.

By nightfall all that could be done to protect the embankment had been done. There remained little to do but wait, watch—and patrol the entire line with tightened vigilance.

The St. Francis promptly spread out into the swamp above Thorne Point, pouring its backwaters behind the dump on the west. Measurements revealed that, at six o'clock that evening, the swamp lying westwards of the railroad was under three feet of water, with approximately a five-foot depth to the east.

After a supper of sandwiches and coffee, Parker bunked-down in his office, leaving Pete in charge for the first half of the night. He slept until Hank Stanley aroused him at midnight.

"How's everything?" he asked as he got into boots and slicker.

"Nothing serious reported so far. Wind has risen and there's not so much rain. Our

trestle-breaks are taking care of the rise in fine shape, Bill—as of now. The Mississip' is throwing it at us in foam-capped waves already. Just sort of love-taps. They'll have plenty hate behind 'em six hours from now!"

Parker slung a rifle on his back by its strap, drank hot coffee in the dining room, then went out to relieve Pete. The night was utterly black, thunder rumbled distantly, and far away could be seen faint flickers of sheet-lightning. Strung out along the embankment's top were men carrying lanterns. Those near were yellow globes of flickering light, dwindling to mere eye-winks farther down the dump.

The going was tough over the cement sacks of dirt which protected the mile of naked dump below Headquarters, but when Parker reached rail-end where there was ballast and surface chats it became much better.

There he encountered the mules. Far down the dump between the rails the little broncs, most of them with backs bowed and fore and hind feet bunched almost together, were taking it. He walked warily until he had left the mules behind, well knowing that the little bronc devils had rather kick than eat.

Half a mile farther on he met Pete and his gang of trouble-shooters. Some carried rifles, others shovels, bars, picks, coils of rope. All carried lighted lanterns.

"All to the good so far, Chief," Pete reported. "But Old Man River is sure getting his dander up. Hear him out yonder?"

The hurrying mutter of flood water, gathering force as currents became swifter in the sloughs and bayous, backed by the implacable force of the Big River itself, broke against the trees and brush. The roar of escaping water in the trestle-gaps was even louder.

"Old Mississip' is fixing to start punching in earnest, sure enough!" Brady, a levelman, opined.

"Better go along and get some eats under your belts while you can," Parker told them. "All crews been changed, Pete?"

They had. Parker went on, observing the lights of the boat-crews which patrolled the east side, the danger side, of the dump. They were going slowly, their lights rocking like burning candles set up in walnut-shells. Their job was to watch for holes or threatened breaks which might begin as only slight washes in the embankment.

Half a mile farther along, Parker stopped abruptly. About four hundred yards down the embankment a lighted lantern which had been stationary had begun swinging back and forth in an arc above the ground. The signal agreed upon when anybody wanted to attract attention. The light kept on swinging.

Parker started for the light on the run, and had covered no more than a third of the distance when the sharp sound of a rifle shot broke in the blackness ahead. The lantern was abruptly lowered, became stationary on the ground, just as a second rifle shot rose above the lower welter of the noises of the water.

The engineer ran faster. Nowhere had he seen a spear of light from the discharged rifle. The shots had not been fired by the patrolman on top of the dump. Just then a flash of reddish-yellow light lanced the darkness about shoulder-high to a man, and the report of the guard's rifle came instantly thereafter.

PARKER ran on, neared the lighted lantern. Another shot came from the darkness covering the right-of-way on the west, and the lantern blacked out. Within twenty paces of the spot where he judged the wrecked lantern to be, Parker skidded to a stop and unslung his rifle.

He had, when first he started running, shoved his lantern under his slicker and hooked the bail to his belt. He snatched the lantern out, swung and hurled it almost in one motion—straight down the black dump where he judged the danger to be.

The lantern fell, cracked up, and ignited oil shot flames in a high, wide flare. The flare revealed nothing. That part of the dump within its yellowish radius was empty.

Parker started on—and stumbled against the still body of a man lying cross-wise of the top. A quick glance under the beam of his flash revealed that the man was Atkinson, the guard who had swung his lantern in a call for help. Blood on the front of his shirt showed that he had been shot.

The engineer, face even more drawn and lined than it had already been, was putting the flash away when a sound coming from

below and on the west side of the dump caught him up. He listened. Again came the sound. The sound of steel grating in coarse earth.

The flash came out again and Parker was searching that side of the embankment instantly under its beam. The beam picked up something and held on it. A flat-bottomed johnboat was lying against the base of the dump—and its lone occupant was frenziedly digging a hole in the dump with a spade!

THE digger saw the beam of light, dropped his spade into the boat and crouched low between the gunwales. Parker snapped off the light, lifted his rifle and fired.

A blast of flame answered from the boat and the zip of lead was in Parker's ears.

He ran forward, crouching, aiming for a spot directly above the boatman. The heel of his right boot caught under the edge of an exposed tie and he pitched forward, dropped his rifle, lost balance—then slid down the slope of the dump into the water.

There were more orange flashes and sharp explosions as Parker stood up and shook the water out of his eyes and ears. He slid his revolver out, bent as low as possible and moved slowly through the water. All was dark there now—but only for a moment. Another orange flame, another report, and a bullet came dangerously close.

That flash of flame was Parker's chance. He took it. He fired twice, listened but heard no sound. He waited, senses strained. Then, on his right and closer to timber's edge than to the dump, a gun went savagely into action. A heavy-caliber revolver. Parker moved in that direction, suspecting that one of his slugs had hit the boat's occupant and the boat had drifted.

Suddenly his progress was stopped by contact with a drifting object. He seized it with a free hand. The gunwale of a johnboat.

"Anybody aboard?" he called.

A groan answered him and he flooded the boat with light. What he saw did not greatly surprise him. Lying across the seat amidships, his face chalky and his lips blue, was a man. His hand gripped an empty revolver.

The man was Elias Bender!

XV

"HOW bad, Bender?"

Parker asked the question as his eyes searched the dump above. The shots had been heard, and lanterns were bobbing along rapidly from each direction.

"Plenty—bad!" Bender managed a grin. "Lucky guy—you! Had Hillyers—damn him!—got you out—of the way instead of Radley," he struggled on, "this would have—been in the bag. Well, to hell—with it! I lost—!"

Bender's choked voice, getting fainter and fainter, ceased altogether.

"Rance—where is he?" Parker asked insistently. "Is Rance out with a load of dynamite, too? Can you hear, Bender?"

Bender made an obvious effort and his eyes opened. "Don't know why—do favor for you," he whispered. "Am though. Rance—is—home. Your girl's there—too. Better hurry. That—damned steamboat won't ride—the flood. Hurry, Bill—!"

Bender died, then, and Parker climbed to the top of the dump. Bender had nearly won. A single charge of dynamite would have wrecked the entire, flood-menaced embankment. One small breach, and the Mississippi would have done the rest.

Eve had gone to the steamboat house. Had taken a skiff and gone to Stevie. And Parker knew as well as did Bender that the steamboat house couldn't ride a Mississippi River flood.

He ran toward Headquarters. Now that Bender was dead and he had time to think of something personal to himself, the fact stood out sharp and clear in his mind that he was in love.

In love with Eve Barry. And Eve was in danger!

The Stanleys' powerful tugboat, the *Wenona,* lay berthed close against the east end of the clubhouse, available for emergencies. Parker hurried aboard and roused Wills, her captain. His talk with Wills was brief, and when he left the boat there was swift and immediate activity on the part of her crew. The stokers, having kept banked fires, were speedily fueling up for a run.

Parker aroused Pete, told him what had happened and had him take over, and when he boarded the *Wenona* again the crew stood ready to cast off. As the tug began her

perhaps impossible run against the snarling current of the St. Francis with its dangerous burden of logs and debris, the threatening storm broke with all-out savagery. There was zooming wind, constant thunder, and rain drove down in sheets. Lightning split the black sky in all directions, rendering the flooded swamp as light as day more than half the time.

The *Wenona* had been built for the toughest kind of going, and she plowed steadily though slowly against the terrific currents the river smashed against her bow and spilled over her lower deck. Men with pike-poles were stationed below, fending off logs which came at the boat like big torpedoes riding a mill-race.

There were other things besides logs and brush on the current that night. Dead horses and cattle were there, and once a man went by, riding the roof of a shed. Lightning revealed him just off the *Wenona's* starboard bow. He waved a hand, either to say hello or good-bye, and then was gone.

Two men, riding a big cypress log, came close enough to the boat to grab the end of a pike-pole. They were hauled aboard.

"They figger the whole damned levee on this side, frum Barfield's Point plumb to the mouth of the Arkansaw, is either out or shore to go out afore another day ends!" one of the men reported.

Parker left the lower deck and went up to the pilothouse. White River Garner, veteran pilot, had the wheel. He grunted a welcome when Parker went in, but never shifted his glance from his course.

"Just ahead, White River," Parker directed, "circle wide and run for the mouth of Black Hawk. It's a chance we've got to take."

The *Wenona,* answering her wheel perfectly, shot into the mouth of Black Hawk Bayou and plowed ahead, her speed slowing to a crawl as she dragged her bottom over mud and through it. Mud which had collected at the bayou's mouth. Then, when two or three anxious minutes had passed, Parker felt the little boat leap ahead. She was free of mud, and if there proved to be enough deep water to keep her from hanging up on snag or mudbank, she'd raise Cedar Brakes well under half an hour.

At length the timber on both sides of the boat was dropped astern, and before her lay the brakes. A vast sheet of roiled water with the green and bushy tops of countless cedars reaching above it.

"That heavy clump yonder!" Parker called out, pointing, when a flash of lightning bared the scene. "Steer for it, then bring over sharply right. We can crash through into Caney best there!"

Crash was a good word for it. White River took her past and below the cedar clump under full-speed. There was a stunning shock, the *Wenona* stopped almost still, then she forged ahead, plowing logs and brush aside, and shot into Big Caney. White River brought his wheel hard-port, and the little tug staggered, recovered, came about and panted rapidly down the stream.

It was nearing daybreak when Parker sighted the Layton bridge half a quarter ahead. White River rang for slow speed, circled and got ready to maneuver for a berth against the north side of the steamboat-house.

PARKER saw them, then. Two figures running from somewhere, a hatch perhaps, back of the steamboat dwelling's pilothouse. Just a quick glimpse he had, then blackness intervened. But there had been light enough for him to see that Eve was not one of the runners. That the figures on the top-deck were those of Rance Layton and Stevie. Layton pursued, Stevie pursuing!

Parker stood rigid with suspense. Had something happened to Eve? Was that why Stevie, always in fear of Layton, had seemingly overcome his fear and now pursued Layton as he had done Hillyers? Hillyers, whom he had crushed almost to a pulp!

The sky was suddenly a broad, vivid sheet of lightning—and three persons were now visible on the top-deck of the steamboat-house. The third was Eve.

Layton had doubled back, going around the far side of the pilothouse, and Stevie, huge, awkward-looking but surprisingly light on his feet, was on his heels.

Darkness again, blacker, it seemed to Parker, than darkness had ever been before. Lightning in a series of broad flares—

There were no longer three persons on the top-deck of the steamboat-house. Only Eve was there. Eve, running, with the wind whipping her hair about her face, toward the port-rail of the steamboat, reaching it, to

lean far over, perilously far—then to crouch back and fall in a small, wet heap on the deck.

Parker turned and shouted sharp orders to White River, but even had they been heard against the drive of the wind they were unnecessary. With masterly skill the pilot had got into position and, just as Eve collapsed on the pilot-deck, drifted his tug securely in against the steamboat-house.

Parker leaped from the *Wenona's* low deck, caught the guard of the steamboat's pilot-deck and hurled himself over it. Gathering Eve quickly from the wet floor, he mounted to the guard and leaped back to the deck of the *Wenona.*

The steamboat-house was shuddering almost humanly, its timbers were creaking, the starboard side slanted deeply—and the old hulk, caught helpless in Big Caney's surging current, was torn loose from its anchoring piles. It went end for end into the darkness.

In the warmth of the *Wenona's* main cabin as the tug fought her way back down the river, Eve came back to consciousness. She turned grief-haunted eyes upon Parker—and they asked a question.

The engineer shook his head negatively, and Eve covered her eyes with her hands. Presently she looked up again and said:

"I thought when I saw Stevie fall from the deck, dragging Rance down with him, that it would be that way. Nobody could get out of that tearing flood alive. And—it's better that way. Better than confinement—" Her voice broke.

"Much better, Eve," Parker said gently.

Eve spoke again. "I went by boat to try and persuade Rance to go away from the steamboat and take Stevie with him. I knew that old boat would never ride out such a flood. He refused. I got the chance to steal his keys while he took a nap in the texas—but he awoke before I could get Stevie's door unlocked. I was just turning the bolt back when he came running up the stairs. He—he struck me, Bill, and I screamed. Stevie's door crashed open and he came through—straight for Rance. Rance ran toward the stern of the boat, up a companionway to the pilot-deck, Stevie after him—"

"I know what happened then, Eve," Parker interrupted. "Just spare yourself the rest. We'll talk things over another time."

The Mississippi's coffee-colored flood roared in and filled to the brim the Sunken Lands' huge bowl, destroying property and taking lives, but Ten-Ark's railroad was not among the victims.

The extra trestles in the embankment for which Parker had so stubbornly fought, blueprints to the contrary notwithstanding, proved to be the railroad's salvation. The savage currents smashed against the dump, surged through unresistant flood-gaps, and spent their fury in the great timbered tracts beyond. Receding after ten days of almost incalculable wreckage elsewhere in the land, the flood left the railroad still stretching its thirty-mile length across the jungle with nowhere a break. It was safe.

Parker and Eve walked along the roadbed between the shining rails on the first day of sun after the deluge.

"A field man on construction work lives hard, even though he's chief," Parker said as they walked along. "You're a rich gal now, Eve, but my wife would have to take the bumps with me. Think you could stand the gaff?"

"Uhuh," Eve told him, putting her hands round his muscular arm and pulling him to a stop. "I could—with the right kind of man. Are you?"

"I could try to be. My next job," he told her then for the first time, "is down South in Louisiana—"

"A jungle job?"

"Well—yes," he admitted. "One more jungle, and then I'm through—"

"Until the next one comes along," Eve interrupted with a bubbling laugh. "Bill, you're a fraud—but you don't know it. You hate the swamps, sure enough—but not in the usual way of hating. You hate it so much you just can't help fighting it. Slugging it, defeating it, driving it back, as other haters in other parts of the world have fought jungles and whipped them on their own ground. Just as you have done and will keep right on doing. It's your job. Isn't that true?"

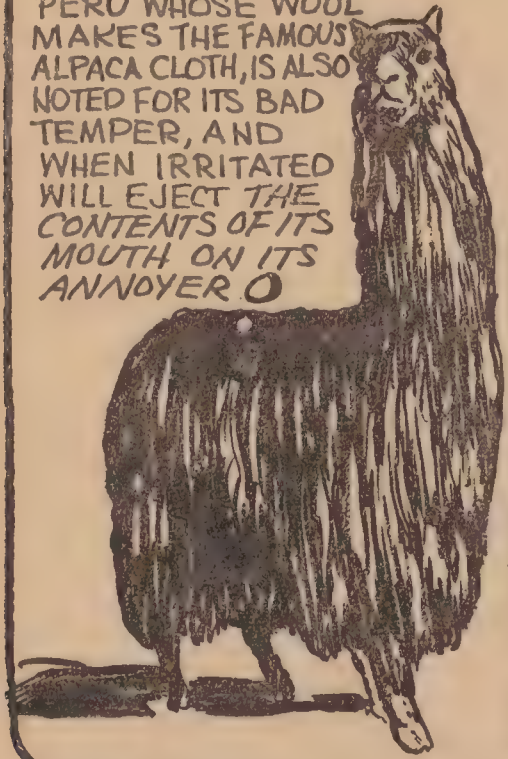
Parker lifted Eve clear of the ground, held her very tightly to him, then set her back on her feet. Smiling down into her upraised, tender eyes he said:

"Eve, I wouldn't be surprised if you're about ninety-nine percent right!"

Curioddities By Weill

THE HOARY MARMOT OR WHISTLER IS THE LARGEST AND HANDSOMEST OF THE AMERICAN MARMOTS. ITS SHRILL NOTE UNDER FAVORABLE CIRCUMSTANCES MAY BE HEARD *FOR MORE THAN A* ***MILE!***

THE ALPACA OF PERU WHOSE WOOL MAKES THE FAMOUS ALPACA CLOTH, IS ALSO NOTED FOR ITS BAD TEMPER, AND WHEN IRRITATED WILL EJECT *THE CONTENTS OF ITS MOUTH ON ITS ANNOYER.*



THE GERANIUM WAS IMPORTED FROM AFRICA TO ENGLAND IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY AND IS SAID TO HAVE BEEN THE FIRST GARDEN PLANT MOVED INTO THE HOUSE *FOR* ***WINTER CULTIVATION.***

Tension Between the Two Engineers Mounted With Every Voyage Until . . . . .

THE FEUD

By B. E. COOK

FRANK JUGLAN had it on any man under him. He looked the brute. With that immense torso, you'd swear he was as coarse as his hairy jaws and chest. And absolutely without mercy toward either engineers, oilers or stokers below his rating, a natural born driver.

There was more to the guy. He could be eminently fair in a dispute, and while hard with men, he respected their viewpoints and their moments of stubborn courage. He was more human and far more easily hurt than anybody knew. The spirit of a Drake or a Gilbert seemed at rare times to reach all the way down to him.

It took the new second assistant to bring all this into view. George Gimbell boarded the *De Kalb* with the air of one much better than a second assistant, and he was. But he never explained it; he had no past. Nor did he show his emotions. Only a trick of fate could have thrown two such personalities at each other and an early clash was inevitable between them.

It came first in the lower engine room. The *De Kalb's* feed to the low pressure cylinder had given trouble at sea. The Chief and third assistant were ashore and Juglan, the First, had looked for the cause. He traced it to overheating straps and dissembled everything from the links downward to get at the defect.

The new Second—who should have been asleep—walked in on Juglan and two oilers and beheld rods, straps, bolts and tools lying around. Three men looked up from these to the chest and stem. One oiler bet

it was in the chest, the other saw Juglan turn over a rod, hunting, and he too handled things.

The two engineers exchanged cold glances. Juglan cursed. He felt foolish. He sensed criticism and know-how in the Second's manner; throughout the last round trip to Santos, this newcomer had meticulously kept his place, yet both men got on each other's temper. Now Gimbell had caught Juglan in a jam and it irked the First.

Finally he got to his feet, rubber waste in his big hands and eyed Gimbell. "Okay, Second, what's your contribution here?" he challenged.

"Just looking, First."

Juglan snorted and resumed his search. Gimbell did not move. The tension mounted and Juglan's embarrassment with it. He handled parts, he shoved tools, he cursed in undertones. Finally he noted the time and it was running out on him. Once again he confronted the statuesque Second and said, "This gave trouble in your 8-to-12, didn't it?"

"That's right, First."

"What trouble?"

Gimbell grinned at him and the oilers stood up in anticipation. "Do you want me to show you?" he asked.

"Yeah, you find it."

Gimbell motioned to an oiler. "Bring that light closer." He then held the sheave close to it and scrutinized both sides intimately. "Here," he called to Juglan and with his fingernail he traced a fine, slanting line along the inside surface of it. "It has a crack, First," he said. "Cracked sheave because the brass on the liner is worn thin."

Juglan said, "Done a lot of this sort of thing?"

"Right, First."

"Then you've gone a lot further than second assistant, mister. How much license have—"

Gimbell cut him off with "That is something else, First."

With his high degree of sensitivity, Juglan felt his standing with the oilers slump. "You don't say!" he retorted. "We shall see about that."

From that hour, their future relationship was set. They hated, yet each respected the strength of character he had to recognize in the other. The oilers, of course, talked. The affair beame of general interest aboard the *De Kalb*.

THE NEXT time she lay loading in Santos, luck gave Juglan his opening. Gimbell had gone ashore for the morning. He failed to show up at noon for his 12-to-4 watch. The Chief, still uptown on ship's business, had Juglan in charge as usual but with a pile of paper work to do for him. It therefore became necessary to order the Third to stay on overtime with no overtime pay in prospect. Add to this the fact that the Third was half sick and you get the effect on Juglan.

He had said, "We shall see about that." This provided the occasion. He conferred with the Chief. Nothing came of it on the trip north. The Chief waited until she docked, then hailed in Gimbell for an explanation. Gimbell refused to plead; he had taken a look inland beyond the city limits, had run across an old shipmate and missed a bus. The Chief shifted him downward to third assistant, the sickly Third having applied for a month's convalescence and got it, and a new Second came aboard.

Juglan next met Gimbell at mess that late afternoon, but now there stood one chair between them at table, the new Second's. Juglan had demonstrated his hard side but none could argue he hadn't been fair about it, especially toward the half sick Third. Now he looked at Gimbell until he got his attention and said. "You like the 8-to-12 trick, I judge."

"It gives the best night's sleep. Of course, First," was the reply he drew and the mates exchanged glances because neither revealed the hatred which surely was there. They remained formal.

THEIR tension mounted with every voyage. Two round trips, three. Spring softened to summer up north and the rains came on the other end. Four trips and still that strict rule over the Chief's personnel, executed by his First for him. Still Juglan persisted, just as strict and formal and cold, punctuated occasionally by Gimbell's courteous though frigid smile when he'd stand there long and wiry and devil-be-damned. Until the question in most minds became: this is dynamite, which one will explode first?

The apparent solution came from neither of them. The *De Kalb* went off the run in July. She tied up to await complete overhaul or outright sale to some party on the West coast. Juglan got a month's vacation ashore at the conclusion of which he was to report to Chief Bellah as first assistant in the *De Lacy*. That would end it and Juglan's relief was immense. Underneath the hard and exacting exterior, his more sensitive side had suffered more than he would have conceded. To have Gimbell aboard the same ship had had its galling undertones, but to turn over his watch to the man twice in every twenty-four hours and to eat food beside him at mess where all hands round the table expected an explosion—it had taken a lot out of Juglan.

If Gimbell suffered likewise, it is to be doubted. Rather, he thrived on the strain, on the peculiar effect he had on Juglan, on the threat to his ego and his standing. Now that it was ended, he showed no emotion whatever. He omitted the customary "goodbye, we'll probably meet somewhere" which often attends the dissolution of a vessel's crew. It was Juglan, his superior, who could not leave it thus. He went to the Third's door, bag in hand, and said, "So we part company, Third."

"We do, First."

"Glad to have been shipmates with you" would not leave Juglan's tongue; he was no liar even in the amenities, so he extended a formal though open hand.

Gimbell showed the hint of that disparaging grin again. His right hand opened a trifle but he thrust it deep into a pocket. Juglan smiled and moved on. He had studying to do; he would go up for chief's papers, big tonnage, during the month's respite. He aimed to rule an after gang on his own, not be under a generous, easygoing chief.

THE *De Lacy* had as much cause as the *De Kalb* to be snatched off for a complete overhaul of her machinery; the crowded first half of the 1940's had put both vessels through unrelenting service. But she had to continue on the Santos run, aromatic from within with coffee cargoes and unsightly without by alternate blotches of red leading, paint and rust.

It was typical of Juglan that he boarded her a day before his vacation quite ended and the minute she got her breast lines ashore. He went directly to Chief Bellah's room and made an opportunity to exhibit his latest license. He was now up to chief's rating.

He turned to at four p.m. for his first watch and spent some of it inspecting steam plant, engine and auxiliaries. Juglan lived his work. When 7:55 came round, his eyes were on the exit; he had a few inquiries to make regarding boiler connections and cut-out valves on the boilers. They stuck open.

At 7:58 a tall, wiry, powerful man in dungrees and sleeveless shirt hitched up his blues and stepped in over the weatherboard. Their eyes met. Juglan's started to crinkle in recognition; Gimbell's face and manner remained in perfect, cold control.

Said Juglan, "So we are shipmates again, Third," and he laid just the suggestion of emphasis on the last word, watching for the effect.

Without a flicker Gimbell responded, "Shipmates, First," in a tone that which may as well have added, "but no quarter."

Thus the feud resumed, though under slightly altered conditions. Captain Slosson of the *De Lacy* had a way of uniting his officers into a sort of family. It showed best at mess. He studied them, judged them and liked each one — when possible — for his particular talents. What would the feud do to this? Well, nobody could have conjectured and neither Juglan nor Gimbell

was the sort to seek adherents by voicing his private affairs.

Juglan had been aboard but one trip when he learned why he had been assigned to the *De Lacy*. Chief called him in after his watch, one night off Cape St. Rogue. "Lots of changes on the make in this outfit, First," said he. "They've ordered me to the *Boonesboro* on the Gulf run. I leave this one after two more trips. I'm going to miss the smell of coffee." He looked directly at the First; it was the latter's turn to speak.

"Congratulations, Chief. That's a boost, passenger run."

"Passenger-cargo, yes, but you're on a schedule there. Not the easy-going life we've had here; have to dress up and answer foolish questions from the passengers, you know."

Juglan began to wonder what the next chief would be like. The thought about his new license, another series of openings coming up, both chiefs and firsts.

"I shall recommend you to succeed me here," the Chief said unexpectedly.

Something clicked on, hard and brittle, in Juglan's brain. He go chief with that Gimbell on his hands? What about getting into the passenger runs himself? This man might take him along as his First in the *Boonesboro*. Quickly he weighed the two ideas; dirty freighter vs passengership life, Santos vs a variety of colorful West Indies ports of call. Above all, he weighed life in a ship without Gimbell's hard presence in her engine room, at mess. He tried to contemplate it objectively, a life where Gimbell's evident though unmentioned longer time as an engineer and his rigid formality and nasty grin would never again— "Thank you, Chief. I'll think it over."

He left the Chief a trifle puzzled.

All the way north, that trip, Juglan pondered. Then, off Highland Light and almost in, decision struck him like a blow. He walk out? Gimbell must have seen his new license; Gimbell would know he'd taken the first opportunity to run away—or had been refused the Chief's job. He would stay on. He'd go chief. He'd rule the after gang precisely as he had planned it during the many, many months he had envisioned himself a chief. And he'd have none of these breakdowns at sea!

When the *De Lacy* got in, he learned that application for First on the *Boonesboro* by him would have been turned down, denied, refused. It gave him a new sense of career, a feeling that fortune was advancing him in spite of whatever he might have attempted to check it. The company, so the Chief long had reminded him, had a rule that in tight situations the chief engineer took the throttle. He, the new chief, would have to remember that one and manage accordingly at all times—strict but fair, with a constant eye on upkeep and performance at sea.

He thanked the Chief again.

CHIEF JUGLAN'S new cap scintillated in its brassbound splendor. He heard voices in the upper engine room at a 'tween watches moment. Looking in, he saw all three assistants, a rare occasion only likely at dock. The stocky Second looked ludicrous giving pointers to the skinny, much taller, new First and beyond them stood Gimbell apart, mentally above them, professionally their superior and refraining from voicing anything to anybody.

Juglan drew his eyes. Their glances met and again Gimbell seemed to check a grin. It was as though he would say, "Juglan, you green chief, any jam you get afoul of, I'll know the answers before you can reach a decision."

Juglan had been hoping for this chance moment to meet all three at once; he had anticipated the brittle Gimbell scorn, determined to do or say nothing which could be seized upon. He stepped in. When all eyes turned his way, he spoke.

"The engine requires some degree of repairing every time she lets go of it in port. That means two of you at a time will get no shore leaves. I shall assign you"—he focused on the Third—"by seniority. I shall be fair and strict; a ship in this one's condition threatens her engineers with blame for something, if neglected, most of the time."

He addressed the stumpy Second. "Mister Wright, have a man try the wheel valves on your boilers in the Middle Watch; I don't like the piping there but I can't get replacement stock. Keep those shut-offs limbered up in case."

He left them, firmly set to fire the first one to test his warning after the easy-going rule of Chief Bellah. Gimbell's very silence and emotionless fixed features had prompted a query as to what he would do.

Gimbell did his duties meticulously; nobody need warn him of Juglan's exactitude. He took over from the new First with an economy of words that was beautiful; he turned her over to the Second in like manner. But both of them recognized his air, his know-how; they agreed with the growing opinion that here was an expert with a past. Neither got him to mention it, of course, yet neither could talk to him as a mere Third.

Captain Slosson by that time had accepted the Third; more than this, he decided he liked the man. His manner, his bearing belied his rating and intrigued the skipper, even as it had the others though less hastily. He spoke to Chief Juglan and the latter admitted Gimbell's extraordinary know-how, but he froze to silence on all other phases of the Third's make-up.

Nothing daunted, the skipper made an occasion to have the Third in his cabin. Slings loaded coffee into the holds, the winches whined, men shouted in Portuguese and the heat was oppressive. But the skipper mopped his face and managed to be heard above the noises coming in through his open ports. He led Gimbell to talk about ships both had known in the war years, about fine officers who had been lost, and where some of the lucky were now. It all led around to Gimbell himself, rather artfully, until Slosson could say, "Mister, you should go far in this fleet; you see we have both freight and cargo-cruise passenger service, plenty of licenses called for. I shall recommend you myself whenever you go up for better papers, if you need it—also when I see an opening coming that seems to me to call for your talents."

"Well, thank you, Cap'n. This is a surprise, and gratifying. Very thoughtful of you. I'll remember what you say, sir. I shall have occasion to ask for—"

Vibration had jarred the door open a crack; now it swung open in this particularly noisy moment. Both looked toward it as the outside noises multiplied and there stood the Chief. His eyes were fixed on Gimbell and he laughed outright. But the laugh rang hollow when Gimbell's face changed. For the first time in their long mutual respect and hatred, one of them had deliberately shown scorn.

The truth was, Juglan had been standing within earshot longer than they had known. He quickly caught the drift of the skipper's talk, recognized what was going on and his resentment had mounted apace, climaxing in the laugh. Gimbell went aft and the Chief discussed certain orders for supplies aft with the skipper; but he left the latter in a humble mood. Never in his stern, perfectionist life as an officer had he experienced humbleness. Humiliated he had been, notably when this same Gimbell had shown him the crack in the sheave, but to feel downright humble!

Which only proved, so it would appear, that never would he come up a winner where Gimbell figured. Never. The man's mere facial expression had left Juglan a poor second best in the captain's opinion and he had showed it. Which boded ill; Captain Slosson may seem to have made much of his officers but he was no man to cross.

From that hour, Gimbell crowded Juglan. He reported defects in the auxiliaries, the boilers, the steam lines, defects the Chief knew were there and had not discussed ashore because supply shortages were prevalent and he dared not risk becoming an office nuisance. The ship's entire power plant cried out loud for overhaul; they knew it ashore.

It reached the pass where Gimbell left a note on his desk at midnight: "Hunted everywhere aft for you. Low pressure piston gland shooting too much steam. Signed: Third Assistant."

He kept up the harassment until the Chief stood over him through two bells in the First Night Trick. Neither spoke during that tense hour. When the spanner finished banging out two bells on the bar, Juglan caught the Third over his log to say, "Third, you're not contented aboard this vessel. Any trip you decide to quit—"

"I like it!" Gimbell chirped disarmingly. "And you, Chief?"

Juglan let the effrontery go to say further, "Everybody concerned knows we're overdue in machine-shop. Use better discretion in registering complaints. A good engineer does with what he has. You know that."

"Then I know—" Gimbell began, formal beyond endurance.

"Yes, you know," Juglan cut him off, "and some day I shall find out where you got it, Third."

Gimbell flushed, tightened his fists on the log book and shouted above the noises of the machinery, "Wise men do with what they have, Chief Juglan."

"I haven't enough on you, Third."

Gimbell slewed out from behind the little shelf with the speed and agility of a panther. His fist glanced along Juglan's right jaw. Then took place one of the strangest set-tos that ever happened on the "bridge" of an engine room. That first lightning swift blow would have ended it with Juglan on his back and out.

But it glanced and the Chief's brain stayed clear. He welcomed the showdown. He knew well how to fight and he packed a terrific right, himself. For the briefest instant he was torn between his hatred for Gimbell and the requirements attendant upon his position as chief engineer, between long overdue satisfaction and the likely ruin of his career in one disgraceful incident of this nature.

Suddenly it flashed across his brain; Gimbell had nettled him to bring on this fight in which he hoped not only to lick him but ruin him. Gimbell's career obviously had been blighted, else he'd never have accepted demotion to Third so easily.

He himself had little to lose, therefore he pressed the fight.

Juglan did the smart, though humiliating, thing; he guarded, he threw no punches. It became a strange, bitter performance. Juglan would not slug it out, Gimbell was committed to it. Back and forth they moved over the greasy, treacherous gratings, an area much too narrow for good footwork. Gimbell drove for the eyes, Juglan's left took most of the blows. He tried for the waistline, got in one shot that drove the wind out of Juglan's mouth and slowed him perceptibly. Time and again the Chief saw openings; he could have floored the anger-blinded man in two carefully timed blows, he ached to do it, to end this disgraceful performance before somebody should come along a passageway and witness the affair.

It must not go on! Whether he slugged or not, the event itself would finish what his laugh in the skipper's doorway had begun. He had to end it. But how? How long would Gimbell fight? How long could he?

Juglan decided—indefinitely. The man was absolutely beside himself, mad with the strength madness affords, gambling everything on ruining the foe who had threatened to probe into his past.

Juglan took a few more solid blows and they hurt; he gave none, he broke more blows with his splendid guard than he could tally. For he worried—and groped all the while for an end. He got the idea when Gimbell's right foot slid on the oily gratings. He waited.

Gimbell cursed him and shifted to rushing tactics, coming in with head low and weaving. The rascal certainly had learned much of the art of fighting the varieties of attack. But he must have been surprised, by then, in Juglan; and by then he knew that Juglan would not punch. It redoubled his fury, but it required of him little self-defense either. Therefore he gave his arms a respite in the headlong attempt to rush Juglan off his feet. He came in low, fullback style—

Juglan's moment had come. Leaping sidewise abruptly, close against the pipe-rail, he let Gimbell go past. The Third's sturdy legs drove him on, his feet slid on the grease, he pitched headforemost and slid on to the weatherboard. His head struck it with all the accumulated force of his momentum and he lay there face down.

Juglan ran for ice water and brought him to without ceremony. He yanked him to his feet, braced him against the bulkhead and cuffed his face until the eyes opened and the Third knew he had failed.

One might expect the Chief to give George Gimbell the works after that torrid quarter hour. As soon as the Third's eyes winked and he looked around him, Juglan let go, stood back, folded his great arms and said, "Third, you're an able scrapper. Now go finish your entries in the log and tell your oiler to keep his yop shut or I'll bust him."

It was a generous thing to do and Gimbell well knew it; both were smart men, powerful in both body and brain and capable of appreciating finesse. But Gimbell's eyes slowly narrowed. Folding his arms, too, he looked Juglan up and down. His bruised features were smeared with greasy grime. They drew taut in supreme disgust and his bleeding lips parted. Said he thickly, "You are the biggest coward I ever fought. Look up a new Third when we make Boston. And go to hell!"

Chief left without another word. His relief that nobody had come along the passageway to pause and look in was supreme indeed, but it was tinctured by the memory of those narrowed, taunting eyes, the utter disgust and the speech of a first class engineer, a smart fighter, a man whom he had to respect in spite of all that had happened between them. After considering once to get away from him and after experiencing great relief another time in supposing he'd seen the last of him, tonight Juglan felt just a wee bit foolish; he was sorry to have the man go.

GEORGE GIMBELL had not conceded anything yet; something in the fiber, in the tough severity of the man's character, egged him on. The *De Lacy* ran into a wind, that trip, east of Fryingpan. The northeaster came up quickly with little movement of the aneroid needle to warn of its approach. It hove the *De Lacy* around all one day. The seas, at times, buried her decks, pounded onto her hatches and shot up the forward side of her bridge.

The steward's boys said she galloped. The long, bony First cursed his long trick, glued to the throttle, easing the screw's racing in air. The latest corner, he, so he muffled his discomfort, shot his supper and hung on until relieved at eight. Then, when the oncoming oiler gawked at him, he snapped. "Sick? I'm always sick when it's rough. Who wouldn't be after that gawdam greasy pork and cabbage we got?"

Gimbell framed a half grin and took over. After years at dodging submarines in the war when fierce storms were the only chance to sleep—if any—this was simple. More

than that, it appealed to his bent for excitment, aye and for violence. With close attention to the throttle to occupy his entire watch, the time would pass more interestingly, he hoped, and presently he'd be that much nearer Boston and quitting. Would that yellowbelly Juglan make him out a decent discharge? The funk had better or he'd kill him!

Captain Slosson chose to slug it out with the weather; he, too, wanted to get in. He phoned the Chief in his room and said so with a forthrightness which brooked no discussion. To Juglan, of course, it sounded like the unreasonable demands the bridge too often made on the boilers, engine, shaft, screw and machinery for steering her. But the Chief remembered that unfortunate laugh of his in the skipper's doorway; he went into the engine room, Gimbell or no Gimbell, and hung by and drove her all he could in the rough sea.

The tempest grew worse, yet she fought on without letup. She rolled and twisted aquartering. She took it green over the

weather bow and solid onto her hatches. And aft in her boiler room her stokers—wipers—lurched to peekholes and lurched to gauges on their rounds, then lunged back where iron hexagons, crusted in carbon, in a bucket of kerosene, had to be scraped clean for another watch.

The uproar burst upon them directly after five bells had struck in Gimbell's watch. Steam filled the boiler room, poured out into the engine room and up through the stack space where sailors' laundry flapped and swayed with the ship's gyrations. A seam had opened in a steamline connecting two boilers topside. The water tender happened to be where he saw the first sheet of whiteness go screaming at an angle over number one boiler in the forward battery. He clawed his way to where he could climb; a boiler had to be isolated and he was going up to turn down a wheel valve. He yelled to watchmates en route: "Get the hell outa this!" and was immediately lost in the thickening, noisy, white fog.

On the "bridge" where they had fought that strange fight, Juglan and Gimbell exchanged glances at the first blast. Both divined the nature of the mishap. Juglan's first impulse was to leg it below. He started for the nearest companion down. Gimbell left the throttle long enough to hook a hand in his belt and shout, "No! You're Chief here now."

The seasick First shuffled in and went directly down. Both remembered his useless condition and yelled after him, but the noise of machinery, with the hiss of escaping steam added, absorbed their cries.

Juglan cursed the rule the former chief had impressed upon him, the rule that froze a chief topside. He doubted it now. It angered him because it provoked indecision. "Where the hell is that fat Second?" he howled. "I ordered Wright to try those valves." But steam still escaped and who was attempting to cut it? That man Wright down there wouldn't make it to the valve.

The First did not come back. Two firemen fled by a lower exit. One ran back in and up to report what the water tender was attempting. "And I seen the Second go in after the First, yellin' at him."

Juglan could endure it no longer. Habits of a first assistant still impelled him, the other chief had been talking through his hat, no such rule existed. Anyway, to hell with —the tube whistled. The skipper wanted to know . . . until Gimbell knew that the Chief himself would go below and isolate the boiler—or boilers—and get out the skinny First and maybe the fat Second who would persevere because the boilers were his responsibility.

He shouted again into Juglan's ear "Take over. I'm going!"

Momentary indecision showed in the dripping wet eyes, but only for an instant. "No!"

Gimbell laughed at him. "You're afraid I'll show up the big Chief," he taunted him.

"Wait. Stand by."

Gimbell's temper flared. "Yeah, wait till that sickly fool gets cooked and the Second fumbles—you gawdam coward, we'll slough off into the trough. What the hell are two able men—?" He pounded fists on the piperail, torn between defying orders and obeying his stubborn, newly-made Chief in the latter's first emergency.

All of which consumed very few seconds but they counted seriously. Juglan yelled, "Stand-by here, you." He caught a glimpse of Gimbell's features in a thin space of the fog and suddenly he recognized the man's purpose; he aimed to prove himself after failing in the fight, he wanted to outdo every man here and the Chief especially. He could not forfeit this opportune hour.

The Chief already had turned his back and made for the nearest companion down. Quickly he was seized, hurled through the fog to the bulkhead and on around to the throttle with a force that caught him unprepared and bent him over it. The *De Lacy's* stern took a high leap off a sea, engine and screw raced what it could in the failing pressure.

Juglan eased the feed. That failing pressure worried a knot in his stomach. He thought of coffee cargo and lying in the trough with it and his present standing with the skipper. And Gimbell was gone. Below while he stood here. Gradually it came over him: if the man can save face this way —and save the situation and whoever needs saving down there—let him have his big hour and a decent discharge. I'll deal with whatever criticism anybody dishes up, damn 'em.

BY AND BY in the awful suspense the pressure got better, crossheads did move faster, webs clupped quicker, the r.p.m's increased, the noise of escaping steam and the fog eased away. And out of the boiler room into cooler wetness came Gimbell and all three oilers carrying the water tender and helping along the First whose stubbornness had held him there with Wright until the boiler in question was isolated and the fire killed beneath it.

Juglan got a look at the Third. One was enough. He moved under the feverish, false energy of the occasion and of burns. His face looked boiled and one arm was blistered. His neck, too—Juglan shouted down at him. He stopped, looked up and actually grinned in his pain. It was a crooked grin and Juglan knew that the face was going to be distorted for a long time to come.

He watched them parade out below, swaying like drunks. "Gimbell," he murmured. "What a character!"

Just as soon as the *De Lacy* got in, Gimbell was taken to hospital with burns of various degree. There were times when in port afterward when Juglan considered going out to call on the man. He actually wanted to see him again, once again. He did not. Work below settled that. And when he went as far as the company's office to take the calldown before it came otherwise, he learned that his former Chief had "invented," they said, "several such rulings in the name of the office, all of them designed, apparently to them, to ease his responsibilities as he became sure that he'd be in the *De Lacy* for keeps. He thinks otherwise now, Chief Juglan, and we assume the same of yourself."

MANY a month had passed since the long Juglan-Gimbell feud. So long that Chief Juglan had been twice to drydock in the *De Lacy* and twice passed inspection. The press of work alone would have put Gimbell out of mind, but that doughty, driving, ambitious individual made news. For heroic work in the *De Lacy's* boiler room incident he had come to the attention of the owners; his skill in promptly solving the steam crisis before the ship became the victim in the storm was noted by the right persons. He fought for and got back his license to go chief engineer.

Juglan heard this by way of gossip and he listened in stern silence; he still wondered to what extent the man had sought his own job and what ambition would move him next. When, however, word got around that Gimbell was back in the *De Kalb* as her chief engineer, Juglan felt like a jungle tiger who suddenly discovers a deadly python in the next limb. And when he heard that the *De Kalb's* schedule was putting her off the east Florida coast at the same time that one or another of the competing Americas Lines ships got that far toward home, Juglan tingled to his fingertips. Gimbell was racing them.

And winning—came the next word!

Which surprised Chief Juglan less than anybody. Gimbell had again been the opportunist and provided himself with another way in which to become a bit outstanding among engineers. However, this time he threatened Juglan's own quietly entertained ambition to get the nod into the passenger ships. Juglan recognized that his oldtime enemy now became a contender, threatening his next step in advancement, and many were the nights he lay awake, contemplating a solution. But there was none; the *De Lacy's* runs up from Santos took her far to the eastward of Florida and much of the course taken by homeward bound steamers out of the Gulf and Caribbean.

ONE morning he went on deck about 2:30, restless and worried. At the rail outside his room, in the moonlight, he made out another ship to the westward also heading for South Channel. It was the presence of another one directly beyond her, two of them abreast, which fascinated him. He went forward onto the bridge to identify them through binoculars, the nearer one was indeed the *De Kalb,* the other an American Line vessel. And they ran for all the world like two dogs on the same scent.

"Racing!" he cried and the mate beside him said, "Looks so, for the other feller's the *Ecuadorean.* She's good but he'll beat her. He sticks with them till they get halfway across Massachusetts Bay, then outsprints them in."

"Interesting, Second, very."

"The *De Kalb,* y' know, can do that stuff nobly."

"For a short stretch, yes," replied Juglan. "Been in her myself."

The mate faced him and exclaimed, "Sa-ay, you and Gimbell—!"

Juglan talked to suddenly awakened Slosson as he'd never talked in his life. "Twice that bird has put it over on me in a big way, Cap'n," he was saying. "I kept strictly by the rules in that brawl when I could have stopped him cold, not once but several times because he's got no defense at all. I kept to rules the other Chief had set and this Gimbell went below in that steampipe break—remember?—in my stead and made himself a big shot at my expense.

"Now b'gawd he sees the big openings coming up in the passenger ships and that's what I've aimed at for a couple o' years. Am I letting the first chance that comes go slipping through my fingers, maybe? To George Gimbell? Let him go in this trip not only leading that Americas Line job in but us too? I'd never hear the last of it—you either, Skipper."

Captain Slosson said slowly. That *De Kalb* can step. Nice sprintship."

"So can this one, Cap'n."

"You think so. 'Twould be a tough fight to lose, mind. You against Gimbell all over again. 'Twould make a good story for long tongues."

"Listen, Cap'n. I'm a hard chief, exacting, that's how I've got my plant into top form and I keep it that way. Damn him, I can—"

"He's smart, full of tricks, they say round here."

Juglan stood tall and folded his arms. His eyes glittered black and fierce. He looked every inch the fighter he was, the competitor in whom even Gimbell had discovered plenty to contend with.

Slosson nodded and waved him away. And when he was gone, the skipper murmured, "Drake must have looked like that when he raised a Spanish gold ship over the horizon. Just like that!" He broke into a laugh.

JUGLAN was thorough as ever. In his splendid mind he assembled every device he knew, planned it for a triangular race, three ships to Boston Light. Then he took over and sent his Second below to "Check your water gauges, safety valve, feed and fans, then run up steam to blow her off."

Getting that, he gave her full throttle and with twenty-two hundred horses crowding pressure onto the engine its r.p.m's stepped up readily from 200 to two hundred nine and on as Juglan watched how

the big up-and-down took these initial steps of the coming strain.

"Okay," he concluded and went on deck. All three ships were abreast, all closing in for the narrower opening into South Channel and a course off the lightship. The skipper whistled down the tube: "Tell the Chief that the ship that leads the way up South Channel leads the way home."

When an oiler reported it to Juglan he murmured, "I've heard that one before," and made no more of it. He had his plan and no vocal contribution was likely to alter it. Gimbell had been winning this sort of thing on short spurts; he had squandered less coal that way. Juglan did not propose to lay himself open to complaint either; yeah, you won, but look at your bunker bill!

He did not lead the way into South Channel. He deliberately let Gimbell rush into it and followed him in the second place with the *Ecuadorean* on his tail and fretful at this third comer into their contest. Juglan had no intention of pounding the screw in sixteen to eighteen fathoms, only to pound it hard through the narrow slot past Davis Bank where depth varied between three and six fathom, mean tide. He made the *De*

Kalb set the pace; he would drive just as hard as she did, no more.

Over in the *De Kalb,* Chief Gimbell must have recognized by then that he had run afoul of his equal where tactics were concerned. He showed it east of Pollock Rip in a speed-up which cashed in on the lead he enjoyed. Captain Slosson spoke to Juglan aside when breakfast was done and after other officers had agreed that the *De Kalb* sure had something these others didn't. "You see now why I demurred, Chief."

"Not yet, Cap'n. The race hasn't started —in this one."

"'Twasn't started! Why man, the *De Kalb's* up ahead a mile already and gaining all the time."

" I know. Psychology, they call it, Cap'n. Gimbell is racing me, now, and I know his mind." He leaned closer and added, "I'm forcing him to drive her, away out here before he's ready. I'm burning him up; he knows the *De Kalb* can't crowd her boilers too many hours in twenty-four."

"You can't depend on that, Gimbell's a clever engineer."

Juglan felt quite alone when that meal ended, but he adhered to his plan. Out of the Channel he hiked up the circulator for more vacuum and the *De Lacy* responded to it better than he had anticipated. Off Highland Light she stood bow to bow with the *Ecuadorean* who had surged ahead. Then he got the *De Lacy* to the line of buoys around the cape ahead of the *Ecuadorean* and drove her on to within five lengths of the *De Kalb.*

But the latter yielded no more; she held it that way past Race Point and nothing appeared more certain than that she'd already won. George Gimbell must have flung his cap high; he saw the *De Lacy* well astern and doing her utmost to barely hold her lead over the *Ecuadorean*—in second place.

Juglan's assistants by then had the story behind this struggle; this was an old feud, was it? Another battle between the two chiefs and theirs was losing it in the last four hours. They eyed him covertly, but he was a stern chief; they held their tongues.

Still Juglan took it all and held to his schedule. Exactly fifty minutes west of Race Point he consulted the skipper about water, fresh. He got his okay and ordered his assistant on watch to pump fresh water overside. "Save only enough to get in on," he stipulated.

Soon the *De Lacy* was moving up to within three lengths of the *De Kalb* and leaving the *Ecuadorean* out of the race. Men lined the *De Kalb's* taffrail, gaped at the unexpected, shouted—soon she, too, started to lighten by discharging water.

It was at this point that Juglan made his supreme bid for a victory, for recognition over Gimbell, for the defeat of the man who had cursed and bedevilled his recent years and stung him in a hundred ways which only they themselves knew. He watched for the first indication of water discharging on the vessel up ahead. The instant it flashed white in the sunlight he hurried back to the swishing speed of rods, the sustained, basso growl of the shaft and the welcome hot smell of steam. One assistant had the throttle, the others eyed the engine's metronomic vibrations, their fists clamped tight on the piperail.

Juglan caught it all in one swift glance; these men were with him, pride in their ship and their profession had made of them partisans. Not that he took credit for it, he knew the price of his stern, though fair, rule.

He shouted an order; his First ran below and "set down two squares on the safety" for a supreme gamble in excessive steam pressure. He shouted, "Crowd that damned circulator!" and the stocky Second sped away.

He himself opened a by-pass that fed steam directly to the large, low-pressure cylinder, converting it to high-pressure. The very atmosphere became supercharged with a supreme bid for power, speed, drive. The *De Lacy* now operated at utmost capacity.

Juglan stood there, arms folded, fists tight, looking, listening, feeling the terrific tension all around him, sensitive to the punishment on every square foot of steel, and hoping nothing would fail. Until he felt the Third's eyes fixed upon him and nodded slowly; she was meeting the most severe demand that ever would be put upon her.

The air in the passageway cooled him. He went out on deck into the cooler air. Even he was surprised at what he had accomplished; the *De Lacy* had nearly closed the gap, her bow stood off the *De Kalb's* counter where white foam reflected and spattered its

quaking surface. And she was reaching on.

The ships now stood abeam, much closer than they would have at sea, as Juglan went to a rail and looked across until he saw Gimbell come rushing out, fight written in his face, his stance, his gestures. Juglan waved his cap back and forth in a slow, dignified hail and Gimbell, not to be outdone, responded with a wave exactly as formal.

Juglan remembered their first encounter over the cracked sheave to shout, "And what is your contribution here, Chief?"

Without a moment's hesitation Gimbell shouted back, "Looking, Chief, just looking."

Then the *De Lacy* was on her way into the lead. She had four lengths to the good after crossing Boston Bay. She had Boston Light abeam when the *De Kalb* fell astern rapidly. Something had gone wrong. She had been forced too far too long, proving what Juglan had confided to Slosson; she had been driven too hard and the price would be repairs.

The *De Lacy,* of course, slowed down through the Narrows; her race was won. Men talked about it on her stern, on the bridge, in the fo'castles. The Third defied his Chief's formality to exclaim, "She's okay, Chief, what? Nice going!" Even the skipper had something to contribute, stamping it as a contest, not so much between sister ships which were very much alike, but between the two men who had climaxed a feud.

All of which Juglan accepted with reserve; he was no exhibitionist, he had spent enough emotions and steam, he thought, for some time to come. And for him the race was not done; thorough engineer that he was, he knew that effects on the machinery would be the ultimate test. The ship had come through, what would be the price in repairs?

THE port engineer took no trouble to look up Chiefs on this particular call. Already he had boarded the *De Kalb* for a quick survey of her condition. To Chief Gimbell he had said, "I know, man, but it's one thing to show up those damned Americas Line boats, but you fellers have carried this too far. Hell, we don't fight ourselves. That burner's gone, and that condenser's got to be overhauled. Money, it costs money!"

Now Chief Juglan discovered him turning pages in his log book and sensed what was on. He and his three assistants had finished a job; they had tested and tried, inspected and judged their boilers, burners, connections, engine, everything. He thanked his good fortune for barely time to complete it.

"Well," said the port engineer, "what's your bill going to cost us?"

Juglan still had steam up; for reply he started the engine and restrained a smile. "Your move, Chief," he said deferentially.

The port engineer moved down a companion flight, judged every detail of the engine's performance, the steamlines, auxiliaries, condensers, then disappeared in the boiler room.

Juglan waited at the throttle for whatever orders he might issue. When none came in reasonable time, he turned her over to his First and went below.

The port engineer was gone.

CHIEF JUGLAN felt that he'd experienced his share of suspense in his years of dealing with George Gimbell and with machinery often overdue in machine-shop. The port engineer could at least have said, "That's all" or "Good day." What was coming of this affair and how had he dealt with Gimbell?

Two days afterward, the *De Lacy* was receiving the last of her cargo for Santos when who should step into his room but George Gimbell, resplendent in new uniform; and the glint in his eyes gave no indication of recent defeat.

Juglan sensed trouble in his crooked grin, but his own attitude was formal when he asked, "Just looking, again Chief?"

"Far from it, mister," Gimbell gloated. "I'm taking this one to sea. You are wanted uptown at once."

Very promptly Juglan got to that office into which few of the fleet's officers ever went voluntarily or left unchastened. Scarcely looking up from a blueprint over which he pored, Mr. Bragg, Mgr., reached a slip of paper toward Juglan with the curt, "Bellah's retiring. Take over on the *Boonesboro* right away. She sails at seven sharp."

A Bad Man Passes On

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

OLD CUSH, proprietor of Cushing's Fort, the combined trading post and saloon that served the little community of outlawed men that had sprung up on Halfaday Creek, close against the Yukon-Alaska border, pushed the square-cut, steel-framed spectacles from nose to forehead, and shoved the month-old newspaper he had been reading across the bar as Black John Smith elevated his foot to the brass rail. "This here piece in the paper," he said, indicating a headline with a gnarled forefinger, "tells how some outlaw name of Harry Tracy busted out of the Oregon pen, an' then fought it out fer fifty-nine days agin shuriffs, an' state militia, an' vigilantes, an' posses, an' hell knows who else all through Oregon an' Worshin'ton, killin' six of 'em besides his pardner—an' then shot hisself in the end."

"Which end?" asked Black John.

"I mean he killed hisself ruther than git took. Fifty-nine days—that's damn near two months. What I claim he musta be'n pretty good to keep goin' that long."

"What I Claim Is—to Hell with Jurisdiction; with a Guy Like Him, All We Need Is a Rope!"

Black John read the story as Cush set out a bottle, glasses and the leather dice box. "Yeah, but what did it get him? He might better stayed in the pen."

"What did what git who?" asked a man who had entered the room and crossed swiftly to the bar. As his eye caught the headline his lips sneered. "Oh, you mean this Tracy, huh? I seen that piece a month back down to Skagway. Yeah, it was prob'ly good reddance, all right. He was prob'ly yaller, er he wouldn't of bumped hisself off. An' besides, how'd he git in the pen in the first place? By God, they won't never put me in no pen—not while I kin pull a trigger, they won't!"

Black John eyed the man appraisingly, noting the thin-lipped cruel mouth, and the hard, close-set eyes. "Yeah? An' who the hell are you?" he asked.

"The name is Smith—jest plain John Smith."

"Not on Halfaday it ain't John Smith—neither plain nor fancy."

"What do you mean?" the man demanded, shooting him a swift glance.

"Jest what I said," replied Black John evenly. "The fact is there's enough John Smiths on Halfaday now to patch hell a mile. So we outlawed the name. If you're figurin' on sojournin' amongst us, jest reach in the name-can there on the end of the bar an' draw out a name—"

"Name can! What the hell's a name-can?"

"It's an invention me an' Cush thought up fer the convenience of renegades whose imagination don't take 'em no further than John Smith. We mixed up the names in a hist'ry book an' wrote 'em on slips of paper,

an' put 'em in the can yonder. Sech name as you draw will be your property till death or circumstances removes you from our midst."

The thin lips twisted into a grin. "Oh, I git you. Every one that comes along claims their name is John Smith, eh?"

"Most everyone. Once in a while some intellectual giant shows up with a name like Jones, er Brown."

STEPPING to the end of the bar the man reached into the can and drew forth a slip. "Jefferson Lincoln," he read. "It's a mouthful. But it's okay by me. I'll keep this paper in my pocket in case I'd fergit it."

Cush slid a glass across the bar, and shoved the bottle toward the man. "Fill up, Jeff," he said. "The house is buyin' one."

When the glasses were filled, the man eyed the speaker. "You must be Cush," he opined, "an' this guy would be Black John. I heard about you fellas down to White Horse."

"Yeah, that's me an' him, both," Cush replied. "Drink hearty."

"You heard nothin' detrimental to our character, I trust?" Black John said.

"Hell—no! You're the kinda guys I like. I'm an outlaw, myself."

"Outlaw, eh?"

"Yeah — an' what I mean—outlaw! I ain't no piker, like this here Tracy. I kep' away from posses, too—down in Coloraydo an' Montana both. But I made the grade—got clean outa the country. Had to knock off a few folks to do it. But you don't ketch me shootin' myself—by a damn sight!"

"Bad man, eh?"

"I'll say I'm bad! I come up here to throw in with yer gang. I heard how you boys up here is all outlaws, an' how Black John, here, is king of the bunch. An' how no police don't dast to show up here. A place like this is right down my alley. Even if a police did usta to show up now an' then, they won't no more—not whilst I'm here, they won't. I'll 'tend to that."

"Yer zeal is commendable—if a trifle misplaced," Black John observed. "What, may I inquire, was the initial offense?"

"The—which? Say, you talk like some damn lawyer, er preacher, er somethin'."

"When they invent more big words, John, he'll say 'em," Cush grunted.

"What I was gettin' at," Black John continued, "what was it you done to start them posses after you? They wasn't chasin' you around jest for fun, was they? Not that it's any of my business—jest by way of conversation."

"Oh, hell—that's all right! Bein' as I'm throwin' in with you, I kin see how you want to know somethin' about me. You wouldn't want to be takin' on no punk, nor nothin'.

"Well, to start out with my old man was a preacher. We lived around different towns in Nebrasky an' Wyomin'. There was eight of us in the fambly, countin' Ma, an' what with movin' every couple of years, an' doctor's bills an' all every cent the old man got went out as quick as he got it fer clothes an' grub enough to keep us eatin'—an' it wasn't no fancy eatin', at that—oatmeal, an' sow belly, an' bread. An' the clothes us kids wore was mostly give to us by the church members—pants an' shirts, an' dresses their own kids had wore so shabby they was ashamed to have 'em seen in 'em no more—so they give 'em to the preacher's kids.

"When I looked around an' seen other kids havin' ponies, an' bicycles, an' guns—an' I never even had a jackknife till I stole one—I seen where preachin' wouldn't git a man nowheres, so when I was fourteen I skipped out. I worked around poolrooms an' saloons, an' done time fer stealin', now an' then. One year I traveled with a circus, an' then I got a job horse wranglin' on a cow outfit in Coloraydo. When I got so I could ride pretty good I went on as a reg'lar cowhand, an' draw'd down my forty a month. But what with the poker-playin' an' drinkin' we done, forty a month wasn't no money. So me an' another guy watched our chanct an' knocked off the wagon boss one night when he was ridin' out from the bank with the pay-roll. We didn't figger to knock him off, but the damn scarf I'd tied over my face slipped down an' I know'd he seen me—so I let him have it. We hit fer Arizony—holed up the next day in some timber, an' rode all the next night. I had the pouch with the dough in it, an' the next day we holed up again in a canyon.

"The guy that was with me says how we better split up an' go it alone from there. 'All right, we'll split up an' go it alone,' I says. 'So long.' 'But how about givin' me my half?' he says. 'Okay, I says—here's

your half,' an' I jerked out my gun an' let him have it between the eyes. I rolled him into a rock crack an' throw'd some bresh over him, an' then I done a smart thing. I know'd there'd be a hell of a stink about the boss gettin' robbed, an' there'd be a posse out, an' I know'd they'd figger we hit south on account they could track us fer a ways. An' I know'd it wouldn't be long before they found this guy's horse an' mebbe his body where I'd hid it, an' they'd figger I'd kep' on hittin' south—so I circled around, an' hit north, ketchin' up horses here an' there when I'd rode one down, an' ridin' only at night an' holin' up daytimes. I changed my name an' got a job on an outfit in Wyomin', an' then drifted over into Montana an' worked there on different outfits fer a couple of years.

"I was workin' fer the TU outfit this summer, an' a couple months back, when we was gittin' ready to roll the wagons fer the fall roundup, I was out gatherin' horses, when I met up with a guy ridin' a Circle C horse an' leadin' a pack horse with a bedroll on him. I waits fer him to come up an' then I seen it was a guy name of Hog Lemon that was workin' on the outfit back there in Coloraydo when I an' this other guy knocked off the boss. I seen by the flicker of his eyes that he spotted me, but he never let on—jest says how he's a Circle C man come over to rep on the TU roundup, an' asks the shortest way to Cow Crick, which is where the TU home ranch is.

"I seen Hog was heeled, an' know'd he was counted a damn fast man on the draw, so I hadn't let on I know'd him, no more'n what he had me. I told him the way, pointin' out Birdtail Butte which is clost to Cow Crick there on the edge of the Bear Paws, an' when he turned to go, I let him have it right in the middle of the back, an' he rolled off his horse, an' kicked around a minute, then laid still. I didn't dast to let him git to the TU, because I know'd the minute he got there he'd spill his guts about that Coloraydo job.

"The range was baked hard, an' my horse wasn't shot so I figgered no one could figger out who knocked Hog off—when right then three men come ridin' up out of a coulee, not more'n twenty rod from where I set on my horse lookin' down at Hog. They was Brewster, the TU wagon boss, an' Charlie Summers, an' old Bill Howard. I know'd the jig was up, what with Hog bein' shot in the back, an' I know'd I wouldn't stand no show agin them three, so I whirled my horse, an' dug in my spurs an' hightailed fer the badlands, with bullets kickin' the dust up all around me, an' a noise like a battle behind, where they was all three of 'em cuttin' down on me with their six-guns. But I an' the horse got through without a scratch, an' I soon outdistanced 'em, 'cause as luck would have it, I was on old Beaver, the fastest nag on the hull damn remuda.

"I know'd they'd notify the shuriff an' there'd be a posse out, but I also know'd what they didn't—that I didn't dast to show up in the badlands, on account the Kelly gang of horse thieves was holed up in there, an' only a couple months before, I'd double-crossed Ed Kelly, him handin' over five hundred dollars to me to fetch him out a four-horse load of grub, an' a couple of rifles an' some shells from Chinook. But hell, I figgered that money was stole anyway, bein' the cash he'd got from sellin' stolen horses, so I kep' it—second thief is the best owner, as the sayin' goes. But I know'd Ed an' his boys would knock me off the minute they seen me, so I rode all night, skirtin' the badlands, an' in the mornin', I come to a nester's place, an' seen a couple of good horses in his corral. I turns Beaver loose, an' was saddlin' one of 'em up, when the nester comes out an' hollers at me. I tells him to git back in the house, but he kep' on comin', an' his woman come out an' starts yellin' too, so I plugged him an' her both.

"Well, to make a long story short, I found nine hundred dollars in the shack hid in an old sugar bowl, an' I took it an' circled around an' got acrost the line over back of Cherry Patch Ridge, an' got to the C. P. R. an' come to Vancouver an' ketched a boat fer Skagway, an' come on here, figgerin' how there ort to be plenty of easy money, what with all the gold they claim they're takin' out up here in the Klondike. Then at White Horse, a guy told me about you boys up here on Halfaday Crick—about you bein' outlaws, an' all—an' he told me how to git here. So here I be. An' you kin see fer yerself I got plenty of guts, an' ain't no damn punk. What I claim, you boys is lucky to git a guy like me in yer gang. What do you say?"

Black John reached for the bottle and refilled his glass. "Fill up," he said. "I'm buyin' one. Yeah," he added, watching the little beads rim his glass. "Yeah, I'd say we're lucky, all right."

"Yer damn whistlin'," the man agreed. "Throw that into you an' have one on me. Might's well spend that nester's dough while it lasts. There ain't no hell of a lot of it left. An' believe me, if a police shows up on the crick he won't last no longer'n a snowball in hell, after I git sight of him." Drawing a roll of bills from his pocket the man peeled one off and tossed it onto the bar. "An' what's more, we better be pullin' off some kind of a job pretty quick—this here wad could stand some paddin'."

Black John nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah," he agreed, eyeing the other thoughtfully. "The quicker the better."

"I passed an empty cabin about four, five mile down the crick. How would it be if I moved in there? It would be a handy place. If a police was to show up, I could clip him off 'fore ever he got to you boys."

Black John shook his head. "No. That's Olson's old shack. It's too far away. A man as valuable as you seem to be should be within' easy callin' distance—so we could get holt of you quick when we needed you. You better throw your stuff into One Eyed John's cabin—it's only a few rod from here—at the top of the first high bank. It's a good cabin, an' ain't occupied, at present."

"Okay," the man replied. "I'll take my stuff over there. Be back in a little bit."

When the man had departed old Cush glanced somberly across the bar. "Of all the damn cusses that ever drifted in on us this here Jeff is the damndest. Seems like they git worst an' worst as time goes on."

"Oh, I don't know," the big man grinned. "Jeff, he seems to be an enterprisin' young man, tryin' to get along as best he can."

"Tryin' to git along!" Cush exclaimed. "The murderin', robbin' double-crossin' skulldugger! Why is it, John, a preacher's kid don't never turn out good?"

Black John scowled. "What do you mean by that? My pa was a preacher!"

Cush nodded, "Yeah. I know. You claim you've got a brother in some pen, don't you?"

"Oh—you was referrin' to Willie. I'll admit that Willie's moral fibre ain't quite as tough as it might me. But at that, there was two of us. Pa's average would be fifty percent, at that."

"Huh," Cush grunted. "Morally speakin', I wouldn't claim there was no fifty percent salvage in you—by a damn sight! An' you stand there an' let him brag about how he aims to knock off the first police that shows up on the crick without tellin' him how Downey shows up any time he feels like it. An' never tellin' him how we'd call a miner's meetin' an' string him up so quick it would make his head swim. An' not explainin' to him, like you do to all the damn cusses that comes along, how there ain't no crime of no kind allowed on the crick! An' on top of that, tellin' him he's going to be so valuable to us, you want him where you kin git holt of him quick! S'pose Downey was to show up—an' Jeff would knock him off? We'd be in a hell of a fix, then!"

"Chances are Downey won't be showin' up right away. If he does he'd get here before Jeff would spot him. That's why I didn't want him in Olson's shack. I want him where we can keep an eye on him."

II

A WEEK passed, during which the newcomer mingled with the men on Halfaday, spending liberally at the bar, and playing unsuccessful stud. Two or three times during the week, as his roll of bills grew smaller he hinted to Black John that it was about time to pull off some kind of a job. The big man agreed, promising to slip down to Dawson and look around.

Then one afternoon Pot Gutted John stepped into the saloon and glanced around. "Where's Jeff Lincoln at?" he asked. "Him an' me was goin' out after a moose today, but I stopped in to One Eye's shack an' Jeff worn't there. Looks like his blankets is gone, too."

One Armed John spoke up. "I was fishin' down the crick this mornin' an' I seen Jeff go past in a canoe, headin' down. It might be he's pullin' out."

"By God, the further he goes, the better I'll like him!" Cush growled. "Jest lookin' at them hard eyes an' thin lips acrost the bar sort of give me the creeps."

Black John frowned. "Long as he was here we could sort of keep track of him.

But down along the river, there's no tellin' what he'll do."

"Whatever he does it's a damn sight better he done it off'n Halfaday than on it," Cush replied. "What I claim, if he's gone it's damn good reddence."

One afternoon, three weeks later, as Black John and Cush were shaking dice for the drinks, Jeff Lincoln stepped into the room, crossed the floor, and tossed three heavy little sacks onto the bar. "There's dust in them bags," he said. "Better'n two hundred ounces. It ain't no hell of a lot—but it's all the guy had. Put up the box an' shove out the bottle. I'm buyin'."

Black John eyed the sacks as Cush set out bottle and glasses. "Be'n off on a prospectin' trip, eh?"

The thin lips grinned. "I'll say I have. It's like this—what with the spendin' I done, an' me ridin' a losin' streak with the cards, my roll was gittin' pretty damn thin. I'd kinda hinted around a time er two that we better pull off some kind of a job pretty quick, an' you kep' puttin' me off, claimin' you'd go down to Dawson an' look around. But you didn't go. So I figgered how mebbe you didn't trust me. An' I didn't blame you none, at that, bein' as you didn't have nothin' but my say-so about them jobs I pulled, back yonder. I figgered you might think I was lyin'—jest throwin' out a brag. So I figgered that if I'd slip out an' pull a job you'd know I've got guts enough an' savvy enough to ride along with you boys. Well—there's the dust that proves I'm okay. What I mean—any guy that kin hit out alone in a country he don't know no more about than what I know about this one, an' pull a job an' git away with it, is bound to be good. An' what I mean—good! An' them three sacks of dust proves it."

Black John filled his glass, and shoved the bottle along. "I ain't so shore," he said. "How do we know you didn't slip down to Dawson, er White Horse, an' git that dust in a stud game, or a crap game, or playin' a wheel, or buckin' a faro bank?"

"Like hell I did! You know where Ogilvie is. Well, I stops into the tradin' post there to git some grub, an' there's four, five guys settin' around, an' some Injuns. One guy's tellin' another one about a claim he's got on a feeder up the Sixtymile, an' how he's doin' all right up there. And whilst the storekeeper's gittin' out my flour an' beans, this guy picks up his pack an' steps up to the counter an' tosses down a little bag an' tells him to weigh out the dust fer the stuff he got. Then he goes out. I gits my stuff an' when I got to my canoe, I seen this other guy headin' acrost the river, so I fools along, an' when he heads up the Sixtymile, which comes into the Yukon on the other side, I heads acrost, too. I trails along behind this guy an' couple hours later he heads up a little crick, an' pretty quick he pulls his canoe out, an' hits out with his pack on his back. I foller him, an' about a mile further on he comes to a shack an' goes in. I slips up there, an' pretty quick he comes out with a pail, an' I throw down on him an' tell him to come acrost with his dust. He ain't heeled, so he pulls out his little bag an' tosses it on the ground, claimin' that's all the dust he's got. I sort of grins at him. 'How about them two hundred ounces you was tellin' that guy in the store you had cached?' I says. 'You go to hell!' he says. 'I'll never tell you where my cache is at.' 'Okay, brother,' I says, thumbin' the hammer of my gun. 'You've got jest sixty seconds to change yer mind. An' then I begun countin' slow. He stands there lookin' at me kinda wide-eyed, an' when I got to thirty-five he starts talkin'. I guess he seen by my eyes I meant business. 'See here, fella,' he says, 'I got a wife an' three kids back in Ioway,' he says, 'an' they need that dust bad.' 'I need it bad, too,' I says. 'An' if I don't git it, it's a cinch they won't neither. You kin dig some more dust fer them,' I says, 'cause I'm takin' them two hundred ounces, er else you're goin' to hell when I git to sixty—an' I'm startin' to count where I left off. 'You got fifteen seconds to decide.'

"Well, he cracks then, an' takes me to his cache, which it's in under a rock, an' pulls out them two full sacks an' another one with only a little dust in it. Then whilst he's still kneelin' down there by the rock, I lets him have it right through the back of the head. When they're dead they can't tell it to a jury. Then I goes in his shack an' grabs the blankets off'n his bunk an' wrops him up in 'em an' picks him up an' carries him to my canoe, him not weighin' more'n a hundred an' twenty. An' I fetches his packsack full of the stuff he'd got down to the store. I throw'd the packsack in the canoe along

with the guy, an' paddles back to the Yukon. Come night, I wires a rock to the guy an' takes him out in the current an' dumps him in. I don't use a big rock so's the police could drag the river an' find the body. I got one jest big enough to hold him under, so the current will carry him along. If they'd start draggin' fer him, they'd have to drag the hull river from the mouth up. The way the law is, if they can't find no body they can't pin no murder on a guy. Then I takes the stuff outa the guy's packsack, an' hits back fer here. Up the White River a ways, I loads the packsack with rocks an' heaves her overboard. Livin' like us guys does, by God, we got to outsmart the police an' git shet of all the evidence, er we're out of luck. Ain't that right?"

"The law is hell fer evidence, all right," Black John agreed. "You seem to have done a pretty thorough job. But s'pose you'd met someone when you was comin' down the Sixtymile—Corporal Downey, for instance, with that corpse an' the pack in your canoe? You'd shore be'n out of luck, then."

The other smiled thinly. "Whoever met me would, you mean. I had my rifle ready, an' my six-gun, too." He paused and tapped the bulge in the front of his shirt. "I go heeled every minute. A guy put me wise, comin' in, that the police didn't stand for packin' no side gun in this country, so I sneaked mine in in a sack of flour, but when I got past the police posts, I slipped it in under my shirt—an' that's where she stays every minute. It ain't so handy as a holster—but it ain't bad. I practice drawin' damn near every day. So now I guess you guys know I'm okay—how about it? This here two-hundred-ounce job ain't only chicken feed. I want in on somethin' big."

"Okay," Black John said. "You've told me all I want to know. I'll be pullin' out for Dawson in the mornin' to sort of look around. I can see you're a mighty promisin' young man."

"Yer damn right," the other agreed heartily. "Fill 'em up agin', Cush. You won't never be sorry yuh tuk me on."

The big man nodded. "That's right," he said. "There's some things I've done that I might be sorry for—but this ain't one of 'em."

After Cush had weighed out the dust for the drinks, the man pocketed the sacks. "Well, I'm goin' over to the cabin an' ketch me some sleep. See you after supper."

WHEN the two were alone Cush scowled across the bar. "Promisin' young man! An' him the low-downest son that ever showed up on the crick! An' you claimin' he's a promisin' young man! By God, when he told about pluggin' that pore guy—an' him with a wife an' kids back there in the States—it was all I could do to keep from lammin' him between the eyes with the bung starter!"

Black John grinned. "You're kind of overlookin' the fact that there's several kinds of a promise."

"When One Armed John shows up I'll send him up an' down the crick," Cush said.

"What for?"

"Why—to git the boys in fer the miners' meetin', of course! So we kin hang that pilgrim."

Black John shook his head. "Tut, tut, Cush. Jeff has committed no crime on Halfaday. By his own admission, the crime was committed on Sixtymile, well outside our jurisdiction."

Cush glared wrathfully into the big man's face as he banged the bar with his fist. "Outside our jewishdiction! By God, allus before this, when some damn cuss pulled off some crime on some other crick than Halfaday, an' you deemed he'd ort to git hung fer it, you've augered that the crick where he done it was subtenderin', or subterrainian territory—er some sech word. An' no matter how fer off it was, you'd auger it into our jewishdiction somehow er other, an' we'd call a miner's meetin' an' go ahead an' hang him. An' here the worst one of 'em all comes along an' brags about all the murders he's pulled, an' you claim we can't hang him 'cause we ain't got no jewishdiction. What I claim, to hell with jewishdiction! With a guy like him all we need is a rope!"

"The matter of jurisdiction could undoubtless be satisfactorily arranged, Cush," Black John replied. "In these other instances, we've always made shore, first, that a crime had be'n committed. In this case we don't know. We ain't got nothin' but Jeff's word that he's pulled off all these crimes. How do we know he ain't lyin'? He don't look to me like no one that would be a stickler fer the onadulterated truth. He

might be just shootin' off his mouth to create an impression. An', as I've often p'inted out, lyin' ain't a crime on Halfaday."

"By God, what I claim, anyone that would brag about pullin' the dirty double-crossin' murders he done, ort to git hung, whether he done 'em er not!"

Black John grinned. "A unique concept, at best—"

"Never mind springin' a lot of big words on me. By God, it's common sense—no matter what kind of a contest it is! An' how about you hittin' out fer Dawson an' leavin' me up here—an' the safe half full of dust, an' that guy right there in One Eyed John's cabin!"

"Jeff wouldn't do anything to jeopardize his standing in this community. If he should make a play for the safe—shoot him."

"Yeah—but what if he shot me first!"

"We'd call a miners' meetin' an' hang him. In that case there would be no question of our jurisdiction, an' with as many men as there are on the crick, the chances is that he couldn't successfully dispose of the corpse—so we'd have a *corpus delicti.* It would be like a drayma."

"You an' yer damn draymas! Every time you've pulled one, I've had some part where I was scairt as hell! But I'll be damned if I'll be no crumpus delinctum, er whatever you call it!"

"At least," the big man grinned, "you'd finally have a part where you wouldn't be scairt."

"You mean you're goin' clean down to Dawson jest to find out if this guy was lyin' about knockin' off that prospector?"

"Certainly. That is, unless I can verify the crime at Ogilvie. We've never hung anyone on Halfaday that didn't have it comin'. Ornery as Jeff ondoubtless is, I wouldn't feel right about hangin' him just for lyin'. We can't afford to get lax with our hangin's, Cush. Jeff won't pull nothin' till I come back—he's too anxious to get in on some job."

III

ONE morning ten days later, Black John stepped into Corporal Downey's little office at detachment headquarters in Dawson. The officer greeted him heartily. "Hello, John! Just the man I wanted to see. Pull up a chair. Any newcomers showed up on Halfaday?"

The big man seated himself, filled and lighted his pipe, and glanced across the flat-top desk. "Anyone in particular you've got in mind? Or jest castin' about for some random sinner?"

"Yeah, there's someone in particular, all right. The fact is, John, I've got a murder on my hands—an' a damn dirty one, too."

"H-u-um. This here murder—it couldn't have be'n pulled off on a feeder of the Sixtymile, about — let's see — it would be about a month ago?"

The young officer's eyes widened. "Why, yes! What do you know about it?"

"Who, me? Not a damn thing. You got any suspects."

"I've got seven or eight possible suspects. Three or four Siwashes an' five white men that were in the Ogilvie trading post the last time this prospector that was knocked off was seen alive. Any one of 'em could have done it—er anyone else, too, for that matter. But the chances are it was one of those in the post that day. This prospector was a checheko name of Pete Barnum who came inside this spring along with his brother Bill. Bill located on a gulch a little ways above Ogilvie, an' Pete crossed the river an' located on a feeder of the Sixtymile.

"Accordin' to Bill, they met up in the post, that day, where both of 'em had come in fer supplies. They got to talkin' together, an' Bill claims that Pete told him he was doin' all right on his location an' had a little better than two hundred ounces in his cache. Pete picked up his stuff an' hit acrost the river, an' Bill went back to his gulch. He hadn't be'n doin' so good there, an' decided to pull up an' go over an' locate on this feeder, either above or below Pete's claim. So, next day he went acrost to look the ground over, an' when he got to Pete's claim, Pete wasn't there.

"He's be'n over there a time or two before, an' he knew where Pete's cache was, because each one had showed the other his cache, in case anything was to happen to either one. Pete's packsack an' blankets was gone, an' Bill figured maybe he'd hit out somewheres—till he went over to the rim-wall an' looked at Pete's cache, which was under a flat rock at the base of the wall. The

rock was pulled to one side, an' the cache was empty. Then he seen blood on some loose rocks, so he hit out hell bent for here. I went back with him an' looked the ground over, but I couldn't see no blood that I could be sure of. The porcupines had prob'ly licked it off the rocks for the salt that's in it, er mebbe it jest dried off.

"We went acrost to Ogilvie an' Hod Britton recollected the two Barnums bein' in there along with the Siwashes an' five white men. I don't believe this was a Siwash job, an' of the five white men, two were sourdoughs, Art Harper an' Bob Henderson.

"The other three were chechakos that neither Hod nor Bill Barnum had ever seen before. Bill says that him an' Pete stood off to one side talkin', but he don't remember whether any of the chechakos er Siwashes was near enough to hear what they said."

"Do they remember what the chechakos looked like?" Black John asked.

"No, that's the hell of it. You know how it is with so damn many chechakos along the river—no one pays 'em much attention. Hod claims one of 'em had a sort of mean-lookin' face, thin lips an' hard-lookin' eyes—but that's all he remembers, an' cripes, that might fit anyone of a hundred chechakos? I've be'n lookin' around Dawson here, an' questioned quite a few mean-faced guys, but they all had an alibi." The officer paused and picked up a paper from the top of a pile on the desk. "I'd be'n off on a trip downriver fer two, three weeks—jest got back the day Bill Barnum come in, an' I pulled right out with him fer the Sixtymile without waitin' to run through the mail. When I come back I run acrost this hot dodger from Montana. There's no photo. But there's a circular letter from the sheriff of Choteau County, Montana, an' accordin' to the description, this might be the bird that was at the Ogilvie post that day—an' a murder would be right down his alley. He's a cowpuncher that shot another puncher through the back out on the range, an' would prob'ly have got away with it except three other cowboys heard the shot an' rode up out of the coulee. Accordin' to this letter, the one that done the shootin' put spurs to his horse an' rode off while the three emptied their guns at him. The poor devil that was shot lived long enough to tell the three that this bird that shot him was wanted in Colorado fer a couple of murders."

"It couldn't be that him an' another cowpoke waylaid an' murdered a wagon-boss back there in Colorado, an' robbed him of a payroll — an' that later he murdered his pardner?" Black John interrupted. "An' it couldn't be that, there in Montana, after he got away from them three that was shootin' at him, he murdered a rancher an' his wife an' stole a horse an' what cash they had on hand, an' then hit north an' got away into Canada, could it?"

Corporal Downey's jaw dropped, as he stared into the other's face. "Good God, John! Have you seen this letter?"

"Hell, no," Black John grinned. "I ain't on that sheriff's mailin' list."

"Then how could you possibly know all that?"

"Oh, jest a matter of hearsay."

"An' his name? Do you happen to know his name?"

"Well—only what you might say, approximately."

"It's given here as Earl Conway, in Colorado, alias Ed Crawford, in Montana."

"An' alias Jeff Lincoln, accordin' to the name can."

"You mean—he's on Halfaday?"

BLACK JOHN scowled into the face of the officer. "Look here, Downey. You know damn well I wouldn't tell you, if he was! On Halfaday, we don't neither help nor hinder the police. But s'pose you was to pick him up? What do you want him for?"

"Want him for! Why, for the murder of that prospector on Sixtymile, of course!"

"You got any evidence? Any evidence, I mean, that you could go to a jury with, an' get a conviction?"

Downey stared thoughtfully at the paper in his hand. "Well, if Bill Barnum an' Hod Britton, an' maybe Bob Henderson an' Art Harper could identify him as bein' in the Ogilvie tradin' post that day——"

"That wouldn't prove he crossed over to the Sixtymile an' knocked off Pete Barnum."

"No—but I might be able to find Barnum's body."

"Even that wouldn't prove nothin', except mebbe that he was murdered—an' we know that already. You jest got through tellin' me that Hod Britton an' this Bill Barnum said

there was a couple of other chechakos in the store that day. Anyhow, you won't find Pete Barnum's body—nor his blankets, nor his packsack, neither one. His body is floatin' downriver somewheres between here an' St. Micheals, with a rock wired to it, jest heavy enough to keep it below the surface, but not heavy enough to sink it to the bottom. An' his packsack is loaded with rocks somewheres on the bottom of the White."

"How do you know?"

"More hearsay."

"You mean this damn cuss told you all this?"

"Told, hell! He bragged about it! Seems like he wanted to create an impression. He did. But I don't reckon it's the one he was strivin' for. He claimed that someone in White Horse told him that we was all outlaws up on Halfaday, an' he wanted to throw in with our gang."

"Then, he is on Halfaday?"

"Damned if I know where he is. You'll have to use yer own judgment on that. But fer the sake of argument, jest s'pose he is there. What are you goin' to do about it?"

"Why—I'm goin' up there an' arrest him!"

"What for? You know damn well you ain't got no evidence to convict him. Even if you'd subpena me an' Cush fer witnesses that he bragged about knockin' Barnum off, he'd get up on the stand an' deny it. An' the jury would believe him, too. It would be his word agin ours—an' you know what that would mean. In the first place, his lawyer would p'int out that when a man commits a murder he don't go about the country braggin' about it amongst strangers. An' in the second place, he'd p'int out that us Halfaday Crickers has got the reputation of bein' outlaws an' our word should be taken with a dose of salts. An' in the third place, he'd p'int out that there was plenty of others in Hod's store that day that could have murdered Barnum, includin' Hod an' Barnum's brother.

"By God, I can pick him up an' send him back to Montana to answer for those three murders! An' if they can't convict him, they can pass him on to Colorado."

Black John grinned. "Jest the old police game of passin' the buck. You pass him to Montana, an' Montana passes him to Colorado, and if Colorado can't convict him, they'll have to turn him loose to murder someone else. You know damn well, Downey, that it's no cinch that either Montana nor Colorado could convict him—what with all the loopholes there is in the law, an' all the tricks the lawyers know how to pull. Besides that, he might make a getaway before you got him to Montana. Or even if he did get convicted, what's to prevent him gettin' a pen sentence instead of the rope? An' then what's to prevent some damnfool governor, or parole board from turnin' him loose in a few years?"

"That ain't my funeral. At least I can get him out of the Yukon."

Black John nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah—I can get him out of the Yukon, too. An' my way would be more convincin'—more permanent, you might say. We're still supposin'—jest for the sake of argument, remember—that he is on Halfaday, an' that after he done his braggin' about the jobs he'd pulled, we'll say, I come down here on purpose to check up on him—to make shore he wasn't jest shootin' off his mouth—lyin' about this Sixtymile murder, an' the ones back in the States—to make shore he wasn't jest a damn liar, instead of the kill-crazy coot he claims he is. You know, Downey, that miners' meetin's got a sort of quasi-legal standin' in the back country—an' likewise you know that, upon numerous occasions we've evoked its authority to red the crick of some ondesirable citizen. An' likewise you know that we have yet to hang anyone that didn't need hangin', an' in sundry instances, they was miscreants that the law couldn't have touched fer lack of evidence.

"The fact is, admittin' he was on Halfaday, I could have called a miners' meetin' an' hung him on his own confession—convicted him out of his own mouth. But lyin' ain't a hangin' offense on Halfaday, an' I wanted to be dead shore that a murder sech as he described had be'n commited on Sixtymile, which, owin' to the flexibility of our jurisdiction would have made him eligible to hang for it on Halfaday. So I came down to check up. If I was you, Downey, I'd jest ferget this here conference, an' go on about yer business here on the river. An' I'll go back to Halfaday."

Corporal Downey shook his head slowly. "I can't do it, John. As you say a

miners' meetin' is okay in places the law can't reach, and under circumstances where the police are unable to act. I'm a policeman, sworn to do my duty—an' in this case, my duty is plain. I've got to arrest that man."

"Even though you know you can't convict him, an' the chances are fifty-fifty that they can't convict him back in the States? You know, an' I know he deserves the rope—an' nothin' but the rope. Yet yer duty-bound to uphold the law—an' give this mad dog a fifty-fifty break?"

"I'm afraid that's right, John. There's no two ways about it."

THE big man nodded. "Okay, Downey. I'm headin' back to Halfaday. If you're goin' the same way, an' see fit to travel with me, I can't prevent you. Like I said, on Halfaday we don't neither help nor hinder the police. But there's one thing I want you to promise me. When we get to Cush's you'll wait at the landin' till I see if he's in the saloon, an' if not, you'll go on in an' wait till I go over to One Eyed John's cabin. We'll s'pose, for the sake of argument, that this cuss is holed up there. He threatened to kill any policeman that shows up on sight. An' the damn kill-crazy punk would do it, too. We'll say, for the sake of argument, that he wanted to move into Olson's old shack, but I wouldn't let him for fear you might happen along an' he'd plug you. An' he'd plug you shore as hell if you was to show up at One Eye's shack, too. You wouldn't have a chanct. But, in Cush's, you would have a chanct, because you could have yer gun out an' get the drop on him when he stepped in the door. This is as much for our protection as yours, Downey. We shore as hell don't want no policeman killed on Halfaday."

Corporal Downey eyed the big man. "Yes, I'll promise that. But first I want a promise from you—that if this bird should be in Cush's, or in One Eyed John's shack, you won't tip him off that there's a policeman on the creek, an' slip him across the line—then call your miners' meetin' an' hang him after I've gone."

"Okay, Downey. I'll give you my word on that—much as I'd like to see that damn cold-blooded cuss danglin' on the end of a rope."

IV

ON THE evening of the tenth day after leaving Dawson, Black John, who was paddling in the stern, swerved the canoe ashore at Olson's old shack, on Halfaday Creek, some five miles below Cushing's Fort.

Corporal Downey glanced around. "Why not keep on goin'?" he asked. "We've got time to make Cush's before dark."

"It's better we should camp here tonight," the big man replied. "If that damn cuss should be prowlin' along the crick an' see that uniform, he'd take a shot at you shore as hell—an' if he's anywheres near as good as he claims he is, he'd get you. Of course, we'd hang him for doin' it—but from your angle, it wouldn't be so good. Then, agin, the boys along the crick will be headin' up towards Cush's pretty quick fer a little drinkin' an mebbe a session of stud. an' I'd jest as soon they wouldn't see me an' you comin' in together. They might jump to the conclusion that I went down to Dawson an' fetched you in—'specially as you aim to arrest that damn cuss as soon as you get there. This here Jeff ain't liked on the crick—but, even so, I wouldn't want word to go out that I was playin' in with the police. We'll get an early start an' shove on up to Cush's in the mornin'. Chances is, if Jeff's on the crick, he'll be in bed yet when we get there, 'cause it's a cinch he'll either get drunk or play stud tonight, an' either way, he'll prob'ly sleep late."

Early the following morning Downey remained at the landing as agreed, while Black John ascended the bank and crossed to the saloon just as Cush was opening the door. Taking his place behind the bar, Cush set out the bottle and two glasses and glanced over the top of his spectacles. "So you got back, huh? I hope you found out that damn Jeff murdered that fella down on Sixtymile so we kin go ahead an' hang him."

"Still don't like him, eh?" Black John grinned.

"Like him! He's the damndest, drunkenest, braggin'est, quarrelin'est liar that ever hit the crick! There don't no one like him, an' I've had a hell of a time keepin' Red John, an' Long Nosed John, an' Pot Gut, from shootin' him—tellin' 'em that if they

done so, you'd shore as hell call a miners' meetin' an' hang 'em quick as you got back. I p'ints out that murders murder on Halfaday—even if the corpse shoulda been shot."

"You done right," Black John approved, as he filled his glass from the bottle. "This drink is on the house, I assume?"

"It's on the house if you found out Jeff murdered that fella. If he didn't, it's on you."

The big man's grin widened. "I win a drink, then. That prospector got murdered, all right—an' from what Jeff told us, it's fair to assume that he done it. Where is he?"

"Still a-bed, most likely. He set in a stud game till three o'clock this mornin'."

"Okay, I'll call Downey in, so he can get in on this drink. He's waitin' down by the landin'."

"Downey!" Cush exclaimed. "Howcome Downey's here? An' if he is here, how're we goin' ahead an' hang Jeff?"

"We ain't goin' to hang him. Downey come up to arrest him."

Cush peered intently into the big man's face. "John," he said, seriously, "you didn't go down to Dawson an' fetch Downey up here, did you? You know damn well that ain't right. If the boys figgers you've begun throwin' in with the police, yer holt on Halfaday's gone. An' when that happens the crick will go to hell a-horseback! Someone else will come along an' take over, an' hell will be to pay, all around. An' when that happens, by God, I'll sell out an' go somewheres elst!"

"Listen, Cush—I didn't fetch Downey up here. He'd already investigated that Sixtymile murder before I got to Dawson—an' he had a damn good hunch who to look for, on account of his description, that Hod Britton an' the murdered man's brother give him, fittin' the description in a letter from some Montana sheriff. He asked me if any newcomer had showed up on Halfaday—an' I wouldn't tell him 'yes' or 'no'. But, knowin' as he does, that damn near every miscreant that comes into the Yukon hits fer Halfaday, he decided to come up an' see if his man was here. Sech bein' the case—how the hell could I stop him? One thing shore, I don't want him knocked off on Halfaday, so I made him promise to wait at the landin' till I'd looked in the saloon, an' if Jeff wasn't around, he's promised to wait in here whilst I go over to One Eye's shack an' fetch him over here so he can get the drop on him as he comes in the door."

Cush frowned. "Ain't that jest our luck! Cripes, if Jeff done like he claimed with that prospector's corpse, an' his packsack, chances is Downey ain't goin' to git evidence enough to hang him on, an' he'll git turned loose."

"He won't be turned loose. Downey aims to pass him on to that Montana sheriff."

"Yeah—an' some damn lawyer'll git him off, one way er another, an' it won't be long 'fore he'll murder someone else. An' what with Downey here, there ain't nothin' we kin do about it—much as he needs hangin'."

"W-e-e-l-l, mebbe yer right, Cush—mebbe yer right," Black John replied, tossing off his drink, and refilling his glass. "It would be a damn shame to have a killer like Jeff turned loose on society. I've be'n thinkin' about that, myself. I'll go call Downey. He's got two drinks comin'."

V

STEPPING across the little clearing that surrounded One Eyed John's shack, Black John knocked loudly on the door.

"Who's there?" a voice demanded sharply.

"It's me—Black John."

"Oh—yer back, eh? Hold on a minute till I git my pants on." A moment later a chain rattled on the inside and the door swung open to disclose Jeff Lincoln standing in his bare feet, a cocked six-gun in his right hand. "Come on in," he invited. "I heeled myself, jest in case it was someone else claimin' he was you. There's two, three guys on the crick that might try to knock me off on account of a little trouble we had in a stud game."

Black John stepped into the room and seated himself, as the other dropped into a chair beyond the table. "Some of 'em got kind of cantankerous, eh?" he grinned.

"I'll say they did! But they can't put nothin' over on me. Hell—I'd blast 'em down as quick as I'd look at 'em! How'd you come out down to Dawson? Find anything that looks good?"

"Yeah—I figured out a job that ort to be done."

"What'll there be in it—I mean fer me?"

"Well, from what you've told me, this job will be the most important one, from your angle, you was ever mixed up in."

"Good! That's swell! How many of us'll be in on it?"

"Jest the two of us. Jest you an' me. I'm sorry not to let the other boys in—they'll be disapp'inted. But the way the lay is, you an' me had better go it alone."

"That's okay by me," the other replied. "The fewer there is in it, the more we'll git out of it. Ain't that so?"

Black John nodded, slowly, and thrusting his hand beneath his shirt, drew out a Colt .45 and cocking it, aimed at an imaginary spot high on the opposite wall. "There's jest one thng that's botherin' me, Jeff," he said, lowering the gun, and balancing it in the palm of his hand. "An' that is—how good are you? This job I'm speakin' of is goin' to take guts—plenty of guts—but it's goin' to take more than that. It's goin' to take quick shootin'—an' damn good shootin'."

The other flushed, slightly. "You mean—?"

Black John smiled. "Hold on, now. Keep yer shirt on. What I mean is this—if you've actually done all the things you've claimed you done, I wouldn't worry neither about yer guts, nor yer shootin'. But, when you come right down to it, all I've got is yer word for it. Mind you, I ain't claimin' you lied. Fact is, I'm inclined to believe you told the truth, all the way through. But—well, in a case where my life might depend on how quick an' how straight you can shoot, you can see that I've got more'n a passin' interest in yer ability with a six-gun. Because, six-guns it's got to be. It ain't practical to use rifles on this particular job."

"By God, I'm fast, an' I'm good!" the other exclaimed. "I kin stand up an' shoot it out with any man alive!"

Black John nodded. "Okay. Then you won't object to provin' it." He turned and pointed to a knot in the log wall behind him and only a few inches above his head. "When I count three, you draw an' hit that knot—you've got to be that good, to suit me."

The man rose to his feet. "Count," he said.

"One, two, three—" The word was drowned in a roar from Jeff's six-gun—a roar that was instantly followed by another roar and Jeff Lincoln jerked backward, spun halfway around, and crashed face foremost on the floor.

Three minutes later, the door burst open and Downey, service revolver in hand catapulted into the room, closely followed by Cush, lugging a .45-90 rifle. "What come off here?" Downey cried, his eyes on the inert form beneath which a pool of blood was widening over the floorboards.

For answer, Black John pointed to the six-gun still firmly grasped in the dead man's right hand, and then to a bullethole, close beside a knot in the wall log only a few inches above his head. "I told you he was kill-crazy," he said. "He might have seen us comin' up the crick in the canoe—an' figgered I'd fetched you up to get him. Anyway—whilst I set here talkin' to him, all of a sudden, he pulls his gun an'—well, you can see fer yerself how clost he come to gittin' me. So, before he could shoot agin', I let him have it."

Corporal Downey met the big man's gaze squarely, a slight frown of perplexity on his forehead. "You must have draw'd awful quick, John," he said. "Them two shots was mighty clost together."

The big man grinned. "Well, hell, Downey—it wasn't no time to be dilatory."

"An' besides that," Cush exclaimed, "it's a dam' good thing he's dead!"

STEPPING over the body, Corporal Downey grasped a small end of cord that protruded from the wall, and drew out a section of log. Reaching into the recess thus exposed, he felt around for a few moments, and withdrew his hand, empty. "I remember that cache," he said. "An' I was hopin' he'd found it an' slipped them two hundred-odd ounces in it, that he got off'n Pete Barnum. Accordin' to what his brother told me, Pete's wife an' kids shore could have used them ounces—what with Pete's mortgagin' the farm fer all he could git the money to come up here on—an' his boy, jest finishin' high school this year, an' figgerin' on studyin' to be a doctor at some college. He was goin' to start in next fall, an' it was mostly to finance the boy's education that Pete decided to make a try fer a strike, here in the Yukon. Accordin' to his brother the farm wasn't makin' 'em no more'n jest a bare livin'.

Them two hundred ounces wasn't no hell of a lot—but they'd have helped."

"He prob'ly cached what ounces he had somewheres else," Black John opined.

"He didn't cache no hell of a lot of 'em," Cush said. "He's be'n ridin' a losin' streak fer better'n a week. He couldn't of had much left."

"Well—that's that," Downey said, glancing again at the corpse. "I s'pose you boys will 'tend to buryin' him."

"Oh, shore, Downey—it'll be a pleasure. Come on over to the saloon. I'm buyin' a drink." When the glasses were filled a few minutes later, Black John glanced across the bar at Cush. "Jest open the safe an' weigh out them two thousan' ounces Jeff deposited in there when he come back from his trip down to the river," he said.

CUSH'S jaw dropped. "Two thousan' ounces! What the hell do you mean—two thousan' ounces! He flashed a little better'n two hundred ounces when he come back—an' like I says—he's lost damn near all that playin' stud."

Black John nodded. "Oh—yeah. I fergot to mention it, Cush, but if you'll rec'lect—whilst he was in here that time, you had to step out back, an' whilst you was gone, he fetched out them two thousan' ounces an' handed 'em to me, sayin' he believed he'd put 'em in the safe—so I stepped around an' stuck 'em in there along with mine. Like I said, I fergot to tell you about it. So get busy, now, an' weigh them ounces out an' turn 'em over to Downey. He'll see that they get to Barnum's widow an' kids."

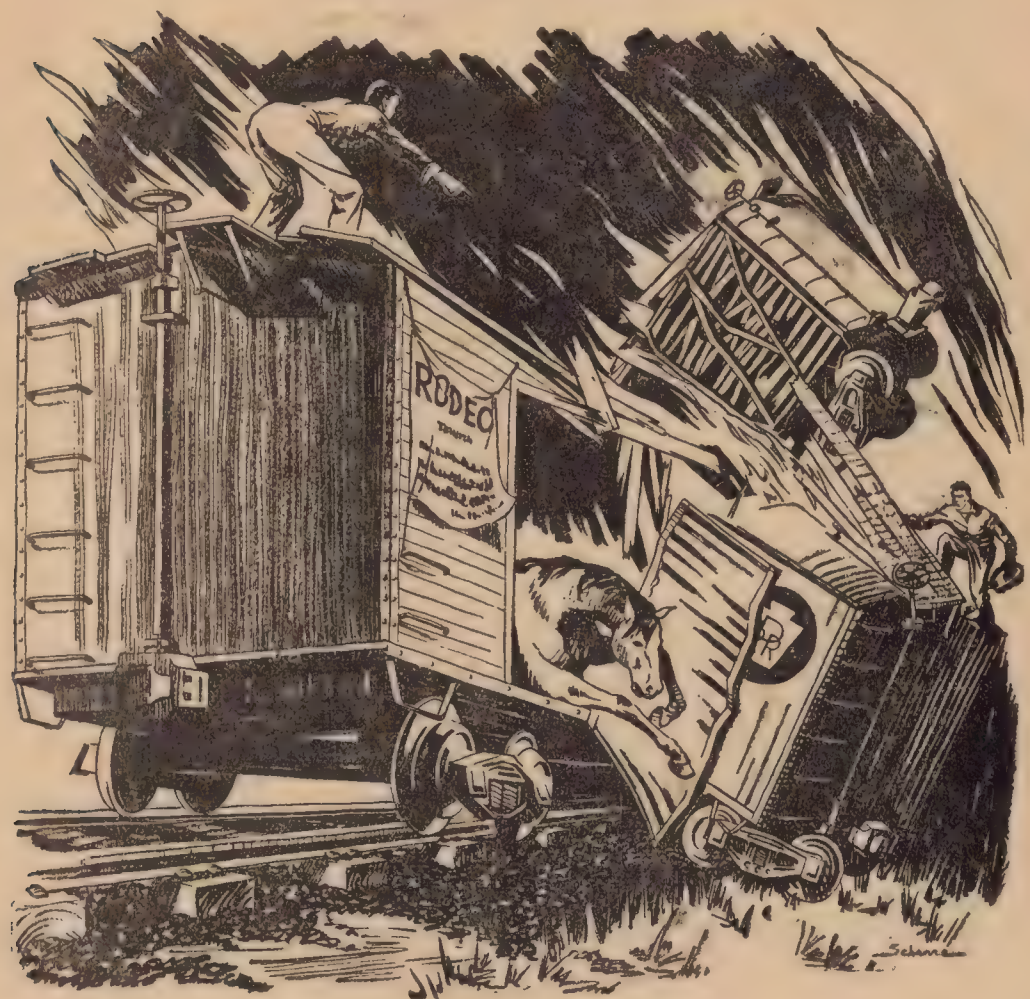
Downey glanced at the big man. "Barnum's brother claimed that two hundred ounces was all Pete had," he said.

Black John frowned. "That goes to show that Pete prob'ly didn't trust his brother none too good. He shows him a cache with a couple hundred ounces in it—but he prob'ly had them two thousan' cached somewheres else. An' if his own brother couldn't trust him, there's no reason we should. You git Pete's widow's address off'n the brother, an' ship them ounces to her direct—an' don't mention nothin' about it to the brother."

"Okay, John," Corporal Downey grinned, as he deposited the dust Cush weighed out in his packsack, "you damned old reprobate! There's no question but what that damn cuss shot first with your bullet planted square between his eyes—but you shore had a mighty close call. That bullet of his couldn't of missed your head more'n a couple of inches."

"Oh, hell, Downey—a miss is as good as she wants to be—or some sech sayin'. Anyway, that damn Jeff Lincoln has passed out of the Yukon—an' that reminds me, I must fish that there slip out of his pocket an' stick it back in the name can."

There Is No Doubt That Horses Can See and Smell Fear. Any Rodeo Man Knows That.



The Hoodoo Horse

By PAUL ANNIXTER

THE trouble began when the rodeo train had been partially wrecked near Pendleton. As usual, fire had followed the wreck and nothing so devastates horses and cattle as fire. The pandemonium that sweeps imprisoned animals at such a time cannot be erased for weeks, sometimes never.

It was five days now since the wreck, and every day since, men had courted death in the arena, riding horses which were no more to be identified with the animals of a week before than men stricken with homicidal mania. The mad fear of trap and fire had reverted almost every horse in the show to a state far worse than they had been in before they first knew rope and saddle.

The phlegmatic "oxen," the wild steers shipped by the show, had come through

best, and in a couple of days were back to their normal cantankerous form. The bucking horses were a different matter. Always an unreckonable quantity, subject to going berserk without warning, seven out of the dozen bad broomtails in the show's bucking string, were still in a state of dementia. Tony Millarde, Tri-State Bucking Champ and star performer of the show, could tell you all about that.

In the past three days, two of the best arena hands had quit rather than tangle with the half-crazed wall-eyes, fresh off the range and dangerous at best. And Curly Baine, one of the top-string riders had almost been killed by a horse he had mastered a dozen times before in the arena.

But the worst of all Tony Millarde's worries was Blackout, the most talked-about rodeo horse of the year—Blackout who had been the pride and hope of Brad Kingery, owner of the show's famous string of bucking horses, since that day in early spring when the wild black horse, fresh from the range, had proven himself the most sensational wall-eye the show had ever known. Blackout had a tameless fire and a peculiar bucking pitch which made peelers and cattlemen everywhere claim he would never be ridden. But Tony Millarde had gone to great and dangerous lengths to disprove the statement. He had not tamed Blackout, but he had mastered him to the point of sticking in the saddle a full minute and more, a feat which no other rider had accomplished, and which had become the feature of the show. As Blackout had already killed two riders, the management had been enthusiastic enough to advertise Tony's ride on the billboards the length and breadth of the country. And now as a result of the wreck, Blackout was one more out of hand, even for Tony; his tameless fury and natural hatred of man strengthened tenfold by the happenings of the past week. Unless Tony could achieve the superhuman, the show was in the red for a log of high-class advertising as well as empty promises.

THAT was how matters stood, as Brad Kingery, the manager, had laid it out in no uncertain terms five days before. When Tony had explained the exact state of affairs regarding Blackout, Kingery, who knew how to handle the contestants if not the bad horses, cut him short with, "There ain't any buts in this game, Millarde; we're runnin' a show, you know," and added that he wanted to know if anyone present thought it was up to him to go in and master the broomtails himself, besides running the business end of the show.

"If anybody thinks I'm afraid to tackle Blackout—" Tony burst out, which was exactly the effect Kingery had hoped for—"I'll put Blackout back in the arena at Cheyenne. You can advertise it, but I won't promise what will happen—"

That had been at Elko, five days before the show reached Cheyenne. That same afternoon Tony had tackled Blackout again and had barely got out of the arena with his life. It had taken three pick-up men to get him clear of the black's avenging hoofs. As a result of that ride Tony still carried deep scars on his right hip and a tightly bandaged arm. That clash with Blackout had left him with a queer growing obsession in relation to the black horse—and a fear that he would not have confided to anyone. His assurance had been shaken to the depths and a great doubt had entered his mind in those moments when he lay in the dust with the grinning white teeth of the killer horse reaching to tear his flesh. Yet not for anything would he have forgone the psychological battle that pended between himself and Blackout.

It was now Sunday, mid-forenoon, in old Cheyenne. The show had come in at dawn and men and animals were now ensconsed in their quarters out at Frontier Park. Tony Millarde sat on a bale of hay down by the "death cells," as the bad-horse corrals were called, gazing at Blackout with gloomy and critical regard. Tony was a compactly knit, black-haired puncher of medium build, only twenty-five, but looking considerably older because of his arresting black eyes and a graven caste of features that up to a week ago had matched his inner assurance. That assurance was in abeyance now to a degree that none of Tony's associates had ever been allowed to witness.

For some days Tony had spent every available minute with the bucking string, but it had brought little result. There seemed no change whatever in the black outlaw and Tony had a presentiment that there never would be, that arena days were over so far as Blackout was concerned. Unlike any other

horse Tony had ever worked with was this black brute. Standing there now, well apart from his cellmates, for the other horses all respected his murderous heels, Blackout looked drowsy and half-dead, dopey as some old brood mare. His eyes were closed, his pure black coat unrelieved except for a single spot of white between the ears. But let a man come near him, Tony knew, and he turned on the instant into a rearing snorting fiend with bared teeth and whitish eyes that looked like chinks of light from the nether regions.

Tony was long skilled in dealing with ornery horses. But in Blackout he had been able to find no quality of emotion for him to seize and work upon. He had tried for days to gentle the beast with the force of human-kindly thought and all the wiles known to the peeler, but to no avail. Perhaps, after months of patient work— But there could be no months, nor even days.

Tony was picturing grimly what would happen tomorrow afternoon when he would once more straddle Blackout in the arena, according to his promise. It was going to be hard on the spectators, hard on the show. Harder maybe, than losing the cost of that special advertising. Brad Kingery would carry a burning remembrance of what occurred as long as he lived, and he'd recall his words at Elko, but he'd have no doubt thereafter of the sort of stuff Tonny Millarde was made of.

A step behind him brought Tony to his feet, poker-faced on the instant, and striving not to favor his right leg. It was Kit Riopelle who came hurrying toward him. Kit was the eighteen-year-old daughter of Colonel Jim Riopelle, former boss of the show, and perhaps the best-known arena-boss in all rodeoland. For the past four years since the death of her father, Kit had been the special charge of her uncle, Brad Kingery, and the problem waif of the show in general.

If there was one person in particular Tony didn't want to see just now it was Kit, who had pestered him with her concern since the accident at Elko; Kit, who knew too much and not enough: too much about wild-horse breaking to be deceived as to the state of mind Tony was in just now, and too little about life to realize that there are some things a man prefers to face alone.

Brad Kingery had set out to make Kit the crack woman rider of the show and with Tony Millarde's help he had succeeded. For two seasons Tony had taught the girl all the tricks of horsemanship he knew, but this did not prevent him from being irritated out of all patience with her at times, until Ma Kelsey of the cook-tent, took it upon herself to inform him that Kit was no longer a child and shouldn't be treated as such. That had made Tony more irritable and self-conscious than ever with the kid. If she would just keep out of his way for a few days, he thought; and above all, stop looking at him with those know-all, know-nothing blue eyes of hers.

As usual she had the pink look of an exquisitely scrubbed child. She was bareheaded, dressed in a leather jacket and boyish riding breeches. Her hair was auburn and she had freckles. All that training they had gone through together had placed the girl very definitely under Tony's wing. He hadn't honed for the role, didn't like freckles and didn't like kids, but friendship and loyalty to Brad Kingery and the show compelled it.

"It's going to rain," she greeted him. "It's going to rain and spoil tomorrow's show! See the mares' tails?"

Tony did not look.

"Well, if you don't care for mares' tails, how about a little mackerel sky?"

"No, thanks," said Tony.

"How does that leg feel today, Tony?"

"Still stiff. Getting stacked in the dust last Monday's been no help at all for the biggest show of the year. Sort of puts lead in where the bounce ought to be—"

"You haven't been sleeping nights, either."

THE statement jerked his eyes round to hers and there it was, that dumb, deep-reading look, a trifle deeper than dumb, maybe, pressingly full of appeal and concern.

"Sure, I have," he said.

"No, you haven't! I can tell. Your eyes —all hollow and bluish underneath. You've lost weight, too."

"What a help you are," he grunted. Some quality in her concern riled him unconscionably.

"I could be, if you'd let me. I mean in my

act. I could do lots more than I do. I'm a really fine trick rider—"

"Sure, you're fine, and you'll be better yet when I get through with you. You do enough, kid; plenty. Thanks for bothering your head, but quit it. If you want to help, quit thinking about me."

"I couldn't do that," she said. It was a simple statement of fact, youth-confident. Such being the case, her thought of him must be acceptable. "I think about you nearly all the time lately—I think a lot about Dad, too—"

He felt himself writhing a bit under her gaze. All too vivid in his own memory of late was that day when Colonel Jim had been penned in a corner of the bucking chutes and battered to death by the hoofs of an insane killer horse, fresh off the range. With disconcerting accuracy Kit had probed to the pith of the situation.

"Meaning," he said steadily, "that I've got a hoodoo on me since that black maniac left his mark on me?"

"Tony, have you?" she cried breathlessly. Her voice at all times had a restive timbre and often, like now, had an anguished catch in it that registered deeper than the ear. "Because if you have, there's something you've got to let me do!"

"I wasn't saying there was. I was asking you if you thought so. You know what they always say: When a bad one has stacked you in the dust, he's got the hex on you. But the horse is no different than before, really—probably hardly realized what he did at all. You've just got to come back a little stronger, that's all—" Tony was telling this to himself.

SHE said in a trailing, miserable voice, "I remember something else they said about Blackout—that he'd never be ridden or broken—"

"We've added one to the book since then—"

"You're right," she cried with sudden heat. "That rangy old droop—he doesn't mean a thing! Why, he's just like an old cart-horse to me. I mean, he's a joke! I couldn't dream of feeling any different about Blackout than I do about—old Rail Fence or Gangrene! Blackout knows it, too. Look at him roll his eyes at me—"

Tony stared at her wonderingly.

"But then, I have a wonderful understanding of wild horses," she went on with dignity. "I've got Venus in Sagittarius."

"You what?"

"I've got Venus in Sagittarius. An astrologer told me so. It means I've a natural genius with horses."

"Isn't that just dandy!" grunted Tony.

"I'll go far with horses. I'll succeed where more experienced people would fail. I'll be rich and famous—"

Tony started to laugh, but found to his surprise that her blue eyes were working upon him as she bragged; a world of difference between the eyes and the words; two different languages.

"Oh, Tony, you've *got* to let me do it!"

"Do what, kid?"

"Take over for you tomorrow."

"Kid, are you nuts?"

"I've got it all figured out. I'll ride Coaly in a special. He's just as black as Blackout and nobody but the hands need know the difference. I can get Uncle Brad to fix it—"

Tony laughed in a heavy male manner. "Wouldn't that be just great for my reputation?" he bawled. "And the show's."

"I'd just as soon ride Blackout, as far as that goes. I've wanted a chance to show my style for a long time. I don't mean I want to steal your act—just till you're all healed again."

"You ride Blackout! You'd have as much chance of coming out alive as jumping into a cement mixer!"

"Then you *are* afraid of him!" She turned on him with a defiant gesture.

"Nuts!" he roared, and Kit let the subject drop like a good child that doesn't whimper when reprimanded. "Speaking of hoodoos reminds me of another jinx that's been riding you," she said, slipping back into habitual banter. "Glory Allen was saying in the dressing tent this morning that she wondered what had come over you lately. Somebody said you'd probably be all right once she got you shoed and halter-broke, and she said she planned to find out. But you'd have died if you'd heard what *I* said— Why, Tony! Would you strike a weak, defenseless woman? Let go, Tony. I've got to put Sheila through her tricks before dinner—"

Glory Allen was a statuesque blond equestrienne with whom Tony had been so smit-

ten for the past year that he had enlisted Kit's aid in the chase, wondering often why she put herself out to be so shrewish on the matter. Because Kit's news had all but taken his breath away, he gazed at the girl with new eyes as they walked toward the arena, and became aware of a number of unique facts: that Kit's hair, cut in an artful bob, seemed brighter and richer, and that her distasteful freckles had markedly dwindled since he had last noticed. He realized abruptly that he hadn't taken a good look at Kit for months—too much propinquity for perspective—and anyway, he had always tabulated her as a rather bothersome brat, forever tagging him around. For an instant he almost wished he were seeing Kit Riopelle for the first time, and in a way he was.

A great kid, Kit, he reflected; never a truer friend. Always with his interest at heart. She hadn't fooled him for a minute with her talk. She had uncovered a thing he had never shown anyone before and wouldn't have for an arm or a leg—the blue funk of a man whose confidence has been all but shattered. And Kit knew enough about bad horses to know that that was the one thing that gave the animal the upper hand. She'd actually offered to ride Blackout, the little fool. But there was nothing she or anyone could do about this presentiment he felt in his very bones.

TONY mulled all afternoon, and by nightfall he was pretty near touching bottom, black thoughts beating up into his brain from the very marks Blackout had left on him. He saw now it wasn't his assurance in general that had wobbled, but a psychological scar that had to do with the black horse alone, that would not heal. Perhaps it had to do with the very color of the brute. What had been a heated promise to Brad Kingery concerning tomorrow's show, he was carrying forward now with plain dogged determination.

Words of old Colonel Riopelle kept coming back to mind: "Horses can see and smell fear. If a bad one gets you cowed once, better get shed of him. He'll wait a long time and finally get you." Tony snorted in disgust at this train of thought and went out to walk awhile before turning in.

So Glory Allen was coming his way, was she; serious enough to make a crack about it anyway. It would be funny if a riding dream like Glory wouldn't ultimately want to put her talents to better, more intimate use than galloping round an arena under the *nom de plume* of Lily of the Prairie. He had sensed for some time that she was eager to get out of the rodeo game, and it was queer what that had done to him, shown him that it had been the chase rather than the quarry that fired him. Yes, Glory was a bit late. Six months ago it might have set him on his ear, but what right had a man who would be out of the running by tomorrow to get stirred up over a trifle like marriage? He indulged in sardonic humor over the idea of rushing Glory to the altar in the morning and dying on her in the middle of the afternoon, while the crowd screamed or held its breath. The fact was, last time he had seen her, Glory Allen had looked quite not unusual to him.

The marriage idea, however, had set him worrying on another score. He had saved up a considerable sum in the past few years. What would become of that San Antonio bank account after tomorrow? He thought of the crabbed uncle on whose farm he had worked like a serf in his boyhood, and of the cousin who lived in the adjoining town whom he had never liked. They were his nearest kin. They would reap that comfortable bank account. He stewed at the thought, and suddenly had an inspiration for settling the problem for all time so far as the uncle and cousin were concerned. Kit Riopelle. He grinned. There was trickery about his idea, but he guessed he'd be forgiven for everything, seeing it was Kit. And as time went on, she'd be everlastingly grateful to him. That money would go on working for her, as he had always worked for her, helping her over the humps, blocking the dirty passes that were always made for a young girl in the rodeo game.

NEXT morning when the two met for a work-out in the saddle, Kit seemed a bit queer, but Tony scarcely noted it, being in such a strange condition himself. He'd hardly closed his eyes all night, his mind being occupied with the weird thoughts of one who has but twelve hours to live.

He had his work-out on Gangrene, one of the bucking string, more to limber him up than anything else. At eleven he put on his

town coat and hat. He wondered why Kit was biting her lip so hard as she stood waiting for him. She handed him a note as he came up.

"Your slow endurance tactics finally got to goal," she said, without meeting his eyes. "Glory Allen's on the make for you. Suppose I ought to congratulate you, but I don't." She turned away.

"Wait," Tony hurried after her. "Let's go to town for lunch, Kit. I'm fed up on mess-tent fare. Thought we might go to the Klondike. I need a drink too."

She looked at him with faint suspicion. "Why pick on me with Glory dying on the vine?"

"The devil with Glory." He tore her note to bits and scattered them. "Duck in and change, will you? And be quick."

He waited, speculating with an unwonted throb of excitement over his plan. There wasn't much time. The band was playing; people were already flocking into Frontier Park. In an hour the big show, the daddy of all rodeos, would be in full swing.

Kit rejoined him in record time, a different, softer girl altogether in her fawn-skin skirt and jacket from the Kit of the arena.

"It didn't rain after all," she remarked queerly as they walked.

The town was swarming with a record crowd. They had a drink with their meal. Tony would have needed more, save for the subtle stimulus at work between them. Looking across the table into big eyes that seemed open a mile down and liquid with feeling, he was finding it unexpectedly easy to say what he had to say, his voice a bit breathless and unsteady. He hadn't realized Kit had this other side to her, any more than he had realized that he himself packed a set of devastatingly attractive male attributes when he cared to use them.

Once she stopped him with, "You're not yourself, Tony you don't mean that!"

"Funny thing is, I do," he said, letting that queer new giddiness flow over and through him. "Never meant anything in my life, if I don't mean this—"

"But," fiercely and sarcastically, "it's always been Glory—I can't imagine why!"

"Rubbish!"

"Rubbish! You egg-plant! Do you think I've liked it—combing the dressing tent and sleeping cars as your go-between? I thought you were simply cracked about her—"

There was a quality about that heat of hers that even he could not miss. "Oh, I was," he assured her meekly. "But no more." It was remarkable how hazy the Glory motif had become.

He came round the table, still arguing. "I've a right to choose the girl I want, haven't I? And the thing is, I want it settled right away. Right now, Kit!" He had her hand now and pressed it convulsively. Then he drew her face to his in a quick, hot kiss. "Right *now*," he repeated.

. . . To Kit Riopelle the rest that happened during that hectic and unbelievable noon hour was almost too much to stand. No one dreamed how she had loved and idolized Tony Millarde for two years—least of all, Tony himself. And then to have Tony suddenly rush her off her feet, overwhelm her with a storm of words and kisses and hustle her off to be married at the home of a minister who had obviously been waiting for them—it was enough to completely short-circuit her mental processes. They had taken a taxi back to the rodeo grounds a half-hour later, arriving just in time for Kit to change into riding clothes for her two-thirty performance in the arena. It was not until she was galloping her mount through the swinging gate that she really touched earth again and began to think.

UNDERNEATH it all and from certain words of Tony's she had sensed in him his conviction that he was close to death. For some reason that had precipitated that wild marriage idea, blent perhaps with a feeling of loyalty and debt to her. That notion hurt more than anything that could have happened to her. He had wanted to leave her safe. Yet there were other sides to it. He had been as obviously and giddily happy as she during that brief hour. She recalled certain words of Ma Kelsey's: "All men are pretty much saps, Kit, and this Tony's sure a prize. That Glory Allen's just been a little too fast for you, kid, but don't go makin' up your mind to anything yet."

If it was a matter of fighting for her rights, Kit was built for it. But her pride found too much to pin to for ease of mind. Neither Tony nor any other man need feel they owed her anything. That point would

have to be settled; Tony would have to proclaim love anew before they could go on. All this as she stood, lay back, or squirmed beneath the belly of her galloping mount amid the applause of the crowd.

In the middle of it all a decision began to take form in her mind. It came from a smiling glance from Tony as she galloped past him and their eyes met. Whatever was back of it all, her whole heart and soul were his, and Tony had a hoodoo on him if ever a man had. Feeling as he did about Blackout, he was practically signing his death warrant in the stunt he was to undertake forty-five minutes from now. She knew how such things worked. Blackout would be waiting to get Tony. And if anything happened to Tony she'd die.

The applause for her ride was like machine-gun rattle. The stands were overflowing. Brad Kingery had packed them in with that special advertising of his, given the mob meat for its ever-morbid sensation-hunger. They would continue to fill the stands daily, wondering if the black killer horse would get his man. Kit waited only till Tony was out of sight, then she acted.

Stocky, sorrel-haired Brad Kingery was apoplectic with fury at first, over the proposition with which Mrs. Katherine Millarde *née* his tomboy niece, faced him in the top-horse tent. But Kit, her blue eyes snapping, was equally furious, threatening an instant walk-out. By degrees Brad began to see light as the realization dawned that, as of today, Kit was no longer his ward. Now she was Mrs. Tony Millarde and very much a free agent. Besides, he was still her uncle with her best interest at heart as well as her husband's. Truth was, ever since he had egged Tony into his reckless determination to ride Blackout there had been something sour about the affair to him; from the first he had been touched with misgiving about scheduling Tony's wild stunt. It was against his ethics to risk a killing in the arena. Now he sensed dramatic things pending and was nonplussed, but prompted to treat the matter with gloved hands. After all, it was nothing so terrible that Kit was demanding of him.

"Tony's a sick man, Uncle Brad. Do you believe in hunches and hoodoos? I do. Tony's been tossed by that horse only this week—enough to put most men in the hospital tent. But there are scars on more than his body. He's game, but I tell you if he goes into the arena on Blackout today, without any help, he'll never come through alive. Tony's mine now and I intend to keep him—alive!"

Brad Kingery stood tonguing his unlit cigar. "I'm no murderer, Kit. I don't want Tony hurt any more than you do. But how d'you figure to work this thing?"

"I want that ride shifted ahead twenty-five minutes," Kit said. She had been doing some swift figuring. "It can come in where the wild-calf roping usually comes, without balling anything up. Every minute's important when a man's in the state Tony's in now. It isn't that he can't ride Blackout; he just thinks he can't. It's all in the mind. My plan will snap him back to normal, that's all."

"Okay," said Kingery shortly. "I'll change the schedule and leave the rest to you. I'd gate anybody else for pulling a stunt like this, but seeing it's you—well, it'll be part of your wedding present, Kit."

Kit hurried away toward the bucking chutes and found Shorty Ellis, who helped saddle the bad ones. She spoke rapidly for a few moments, silencing Shorty's protests with: "Never mind about the Boss, Shorty. This is Uncle Brad's orders. Tony's riding Blackout at 3:15 instead of 3:40 and I'm going to help with the hull instead of Jose, see? Blackout's to be brought into the chute now!"

FROM that on, everything moved as if oiled. When Blackout was hazed into the chute, he had to be eared to get his bridle on. Kit hung over the bars talking soothingly to the outlaw until duty called Shorty Ellis elsewhere. Then she dipped her fingers in the water trough and opened the little box of mascara which she had recently bought and never used. Five minutes later she went to find Tony, satisfied with her work. Tony was mooning out back of the top-horse tent. Kit saw actual relief on his face when she told him his ride had been moved forward.

"They can't bring it on too quick to suit me, Kit," he muttered. "The whipping's all in the waiting."

In the commotion that accompanied the screwing on of Blackout's hull, Tony no-

ticed nothing out of the way. He didn't even wonder about Kit's being there to help Shorty. But as he straddled the churning black, just before the announcement, Kit saw his eye held to Blackout's forehead, saw his face go tense. He knew—just what she had intended him to know. For a moment he sat speechless, then he called out something to Shorty Ellis, but what he said was drowned out in the abrupt bellowing of the loudspeakers.

"And now, ladies an' gentlemen, comes the ride you've all been waiting to see. Tony Millarde, the Tri-State Bucking Champ, and one of the greatest riders in the game, will ride the killer horse, Blackout. Watch chute Number Three, folks! Chute Number Three!"

Tony was still yelling at Shorty, but Shorty never heard. His eyes came round to Kit but she had backed out of sight and hearing.

"All right, Tony. Rake him up front an' let's give 'em the real thing. Get ready!" yelled the arena boss.

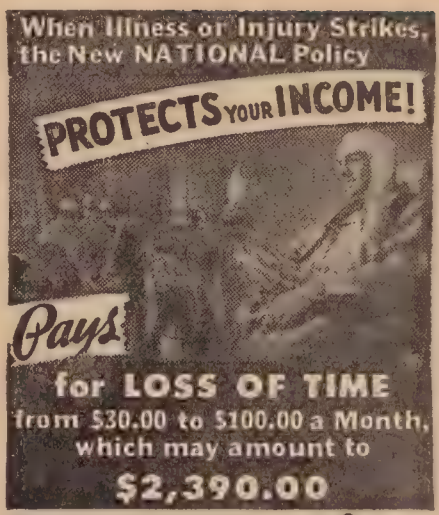
Too late now.

Just at the last Kit saw Tony's face harden with a look of grimness, determination and a world of confidence. She knew exactly what took place in his mind. A mistake had been made at the chutes. Coaly had been hazed in in place of Blackout. A horse he could ride in his sleep—almost.

Then the gate creaked open. The outlaw cringed and shivered an instant. There was a yell and out into the arena they plunged.

Kit saw Tony rake the outlaw, high, wide and handsome, then as the black skyrocketed across the open he stuck like a burr, hands held high, beautifully balanced, taking all the killer could give with that old grin of assurance on his face. He was out to show them a whale of a ride. He was yelling, even fanning.

For a moment then Kit doubted the wisdom of what she had done. Her psychology had worked, but maybe that new confidence of Tony's was more dangerous than doubt. She was aware as never before of the different devilishness that possessed Blackout, the reckless fury that consumed him, turning his breathing into a harsh, file-like snoring. Then she saw that Tony was mastering the outlaw at every turn; his new confidence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plus his genius in the saddle was winning out over the worst the killer could pull.

Round and round the arena, Blackout pitched, lashing from side to side with a whip-cracker motion that snapped his rider from the hips like a rag in a wind. He pawed for the sky, came down on one rock-hard leg and sun-fished wickedly—his wiliest trick, but Tony stuck. The hands round the chutes yelped like coyotes. The stands roared.

The black suddenly swapped ends and executed what looked like a handspring. For just a second Tony showed daylight; his hat sailed, but he didn't pull leather, didn't lower his hands. Across the arena they tore, Blackout grunting and snorting every time he hit the ground. Now Kit sensed a new carefulness, a different confidence. Tony was putting all he had into it—and that was all that was needed. Doubtless he had seen through the ruse by now, she thought. Old Coaly could never have pulled such conniptions as Blackout was showing, even with a steel burr under his saddle, and Tony must know it. But now it didn't matter. Now he was fully roused and challenged. Those first psychological seconds were what had counted. His funk was gone.

Back across the arena they came again, Blackout executing great eight-foot leaps, stiff-legged like a cat in a fit. His eyes were rolling white, strings of foam trailed from his open mouth. He stopped as if he had hit a stone wall, but Tony didn't sail. Then he reared skyward and slowly and deliberately pitched over backward in a suicidal attempt to crush his rider beneath the saddle-horn. It was thus he had killed one rider a year before.

A prolonged mutter like a sigh, from the high-piled seats, but in the tingling space of moments in which the horse came down, Tony Millarde had slipped free of the saddle. Then as the black struggled up out of the dust he was seen in the saddle again, as if he had always been there. The stands cut loose with the biggest yell of the day.

Only a few more seconds now to the whistle. Blackout was throwing all he had of meanness and insanity into the fight. Failure to dislodge his rider in his fall had driven him utterly berserk. There was only

the pounding mad hoofs and the hoarse grunting of the outlaw's breath to be heard as he hurled himself round and round the arena in a fury the like of which few of the spectators had ever seen. A fierce demand rose in Kit's breast that Tony come back to her unhurt. She cried it aloud, love and imploring woven with the heat of it.

Then—the whistle, but it was doubtful if Tony even heard it. For Blackout had reached the height of his bucking pitch. Pick-up men spurred in but for a full half-minute none of them could get close enough to lift Tony free. At the end of that time Blackout himself gave up the fight. He came to an abrupt halt, head down, blowing like a bellows and trembling all over—his nerve as well as his endurance drained from him. He had shot his wad and lost and for Tony Millarde, at least, his hoodoo was broken.

"Maybe I shouldn't have done it, Tony," Kit said a bit later, "but I knew the state you were in and—there didn't seem any other way." She stood in the top-horse tent, very pale and fearful of Tony's outbreak.

"Never mind, babe," Tony grinned. "It was tough there for a few seconds, but it was those seconds that got me over the hump. I can't understand it yet. I took a close look at his forehead, too—"

"Mascara," said Kit, coloring.

"Of course, I knew it was Blackout as soon as he cut loose, but by then it didn't matter; I'd got hold of myself. Why, I was cutting my own throat with that hoodoo, Kit—and it wasn't Blackout at all. It was just an idea. But Blackout, or any other horse, can never hex me again."

Kit would have dropped down limply on a bale of hay, but Tony gathered her up in his arms.

"Listen, Tony. I've got to ask a question, right now—"

"I've got a couple to ask, too."

"You thought you weren't coming out of today's ride alive, didn't you? That's why you—I mean, if you married me with that idea, you're free. I mean—"

"Nuts!" cried Tony blissfully, and kissed her. "Listen, Kit, it was only you and the thought of you that made me sit out that ride—so I could get back to you, sweetheart."

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Tele me, Pete!

R. T. C., Indiana.

ANSWER: The American cartridge for your Beretta pistol which is chambered for the European 9 mm. Short, is the .380 cal. Colt Automatic.

The reason that new American made guns are so scarce is that most of the manufacturers have had many a tough mechanical problem to overcome, due in some cases to the fact that new, special purpose machinery

was installed for wartime production, which had to be modified or rebuilt for the various operations connected with peacetime production.

Labor and raw material problems, apparently have played no small part in this lack of production and distribution.

As for the high prices—it just seems to be the trend of the times.—(ED. NOTE.)

A great many letters have come in requesting information about American equivalents of European cartridges. Here is a partial list of European Auto. Pistols that may be helpful to other readers: The following automatic pistols are chambered for the European caliber 6.35 mm Browning cartridge, the American equivalent of which is the .25 cal. Colt automatic cartridge: Alfa, Astra, Bayard, Browning, Clement-Fulger, Dreyse, Errasti, Imperial, Jieffeco, Mauser 1910 Menta, Monobloc, Melior, N. Pieper, Royal, Stosel, Star, Steyr, Victoria, Vesta, Walman, Walther, Waldman, Webley-Scott, Zwlayacka.

The following automatic pistols are chambered for the European caliber 7.65 m.m. Browning which is the American equivalent of the 32 cal. Colt automatic: Alfa, Astra, Bayard, Beretta, Browning, Clement-Fulger, Dreyse, Errasti, Express, Frommer-Baby, Jieffeco, Mars, Melior, N. Pieper, Royal, Stosel, Star, Steyr, Schwarzlose, Victoria, Vesta, Walman, Walther, Waldman, Webley-Scott.

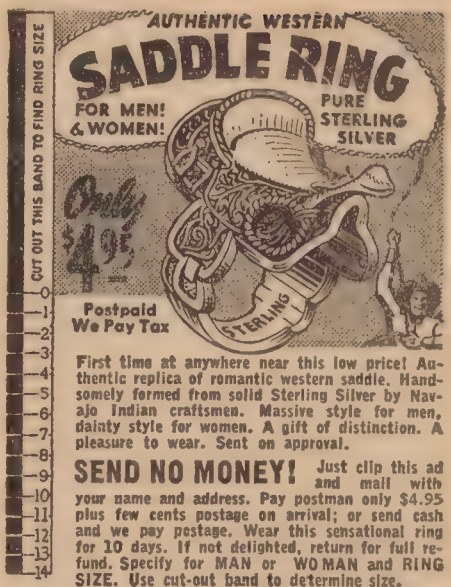
The following auomatic pistols are chambered for the European caliber 9 m.m. Browning which is the American equivalent of the 38 cal. Colt Automatic: Browning, Express, Webley-Scott.

The following automatic pistols are chambered for the European caliber 9 m.m. Browning (Short) which is the American equivalent of the 380 cal. Colt Automatic: Bayard, Beretta, Browning, Frommer-Baby.

The Borchardt, chambered for the European caliber 7.65 Borchardt, is the American equivalent of the 30 cal. Borchardt.

The Gillisanti and the Luger, chambered for the European caliber 9 m.m. Luger (Parabellum) is the American equivalent of the 9 m.m. Luger.

The Luger, chambered for the European caliber 7.65 m.m. (Parabellum), is the American equivalent of the 30 cal. Luger.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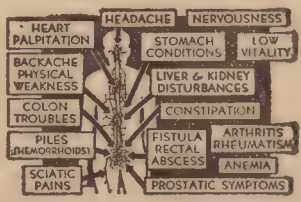

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The Mauser-Militaire, chambered for the European caliber 7.63 m.m. Militaire, is the American equivalent of the 30 cal. Mauser.

The Roth-Sauer, chambered for the European caliber 7.65 m.m. Roth-Sauer, is the American equivalent of the 7.65 m.m. Roth-Sauer.

Smart Vet on the Right Road

QUESTION: I need some inofrmation on guns. Both antique and modern. Mostly I am interested in the old ones. Here's the set-up as it is. I am in need of additional income to supplement a small pension the V.A. gives me as a veteran of W.W. II. I have had to give up my old work for something lighter and less confining.

I am not interested in getting rich from this hobby but believe that I could derive a small income from it. I have collected antiques of many kinds and my experience in this field should help me.

Never knowing antique firearms I have always avoided them, but of late am finding them fascinating due, perhaps, to your column and the fact that I recently came by a couple of nice pieces, one, an 1860 cal. 44 Colt and the other a .36 cal. Navy.

I know these are not the most desirable guns but to me they represent the foundation of a new venture.

Here's what I want to know. Are there any auctions held out here, such as you wrote of in the June 10th issue of SHORT STORIES?

Where can I get reliable listings on these old firearms? I'm interested only in American guns at present.

What books are there on the subject and where can I get them?

In fact, any of the above that you can find time to advise me on I will greatly appreciate. How about clubs etc. for collectors? Are there any? Anything that you can tell me will be a help.

I know nothing of the business and don't expect to acquire a large collection over night and know I will get my fingers burnt many times in starting out. I'm just trying to avoid as many of the pitfalls as I can. Many sincere thanks for any help you can give me. J. H. H., California.

Vet's Reply

ANSWER: Regarding your new venture into the gun business I would say your best bet is to first get a copy of "The Gun Collector's Handbook of Values" by Chapel ($3.00). The prices listed in this book are not up-to-date (there is a new edition in process), but you can get a general idea.

I would also get "Gun Collecting" by the same author ($2.50).

Both of these books may be purchased from Stoeger Arms Corp., 507 Fifth Ave., N.Y.C. I would also get the Stoeger catalog "The Shooter's Bible" No. 36 which is a dollar.

Contained in the "Collector's Handbook" is a list of dealers, books, periodicals, etc., from which you can get a world of information.

It would be a good idea to get a recent copy of "The American Rifleman" magazine and send for lists of guns for sale by various dealers advertising therein—just to get an idea of what is going on.

I know of no auctions held out your way—you just have to keep an ear to the ground as these events are not regular affairs.

If you have the opportunity you should visit the Far West Hobby Shop at 406 Clement Street, San Francisco, Calif. It is one of the biggest outfits in the business.

Won't you let me know of your progress? If I can be of further help, drop me a line!

Dear Mr. Kuhlhoff:

Your letter of the 22nd received and I wish to thank you very much for your advice. I have gotten the books you mention and will acquire a lot more. It is a full time job, lots to learn. Have been a N.R.A. member for some time but the "old boys" are lots different. To date I have some 150 pieces of old and antique arms and lots more "cooking." Have built a shop in back of my home and have done a nice business on the coming deer season. With modern rifles it's nice pleasant work and even if I had it hard to get around the hills, I get a lot of satisfaction handling and caring for the guns in my racks.

I have applied for a gunsmithing course under the Veteran's Rehabilitation set up and expect to start that soon. It seemed

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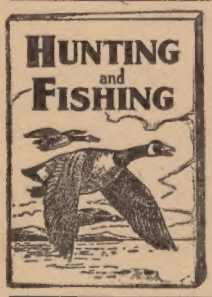

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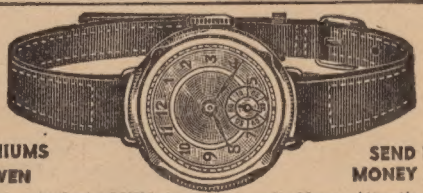

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hard to give up over twenty years of training at a trade (I am 38 years old) but I enjoy this lots more than my old trade. This way I'm free and on "my own." I enjoy the fellows dropping in every night with their deals and yarns. They say some good is sure to come from everything and so far I am glad that I am in the business I am.

Again thanks a lot for your swell letter. It is appreciated all the more, knowing how heavy your mail must be.

Yours truly,

J. H. H.

Unloading Souvenirs

QUESTION: I am a regular reader of your magazine and in last month's issue I came across an article on guns written by Pete Kuhlhoff. He seems to be quite an authority on such things and I wondered if he could tell me of a collector who would be interested in a Japanese rifle which is 300 years old and a Samurai sword which is 440 years old. I also have two hari-kari knives, one of which is 500 years old.

If you can help me get in touch with anyone who would be in the market for any of these items I will appreciate it.

G. McG., Florida.

ANSWER: Regarding your Japanese collector's items:

I would suggest that you write to Robert Abels, 860 Lexington Ave., N.Y. 21, N.Y., who is a dealer in arms and swords.

He can, no doubt, give you the information required.

Army Rifles for Civilians

QUESTION: A while back I read one of your articles in which I arrived at conclusion it was possible to secure a Lee Enfield Rifle for $7.50.

Can you furnish address or supplier, give instructions as to procedure to secure one of these rifles?

M. I. R., Colorado

ANSWER: The Director of Civilian Marksmanship, is authorized by the War Department to sell various pieces of shooting equipment to National Rifle Association members. This includes the U.S. Rifle 1917—Enfield—(not the Lee-Enfield) in used condition at $7.50, plus packing charges (tax free.)

This is an excellent rifle which I have found to be fully as accurate as the G.I. Springfield, in most cases.

Mauser Ammo.

QUESTION: While in Germany it was my fortune (or misfortune) to send a German Army issue rifle, dated 1938, home. My problem now is finding a company which may have ammunition of the correct caliber and weight. I would appreciate any information you may be able to supply me.

D. S., New York City

ANSWERS Your description of the rifle is too brief to say for sure, but I imagine it is a Mauser Model 1898.

This rifle is chambered for the 7.92 m.m. cartridge, which is produced by the various American loading companies as the 8 m.m. Mauser cartridge.

Due to the great number of these guns brought back by G.I.'s this ammo. is hard to find.

You'll just have to keep on the lookout for it at the various gun shops!

Obsolete Scatter Gun

QUESTION: I have an old model 12-guage pump-gun. The Maker's name is given on the barrel as National Fire Arms Co. There are no other markings or address. Can you inform me, if this company is still operating and what is its address?

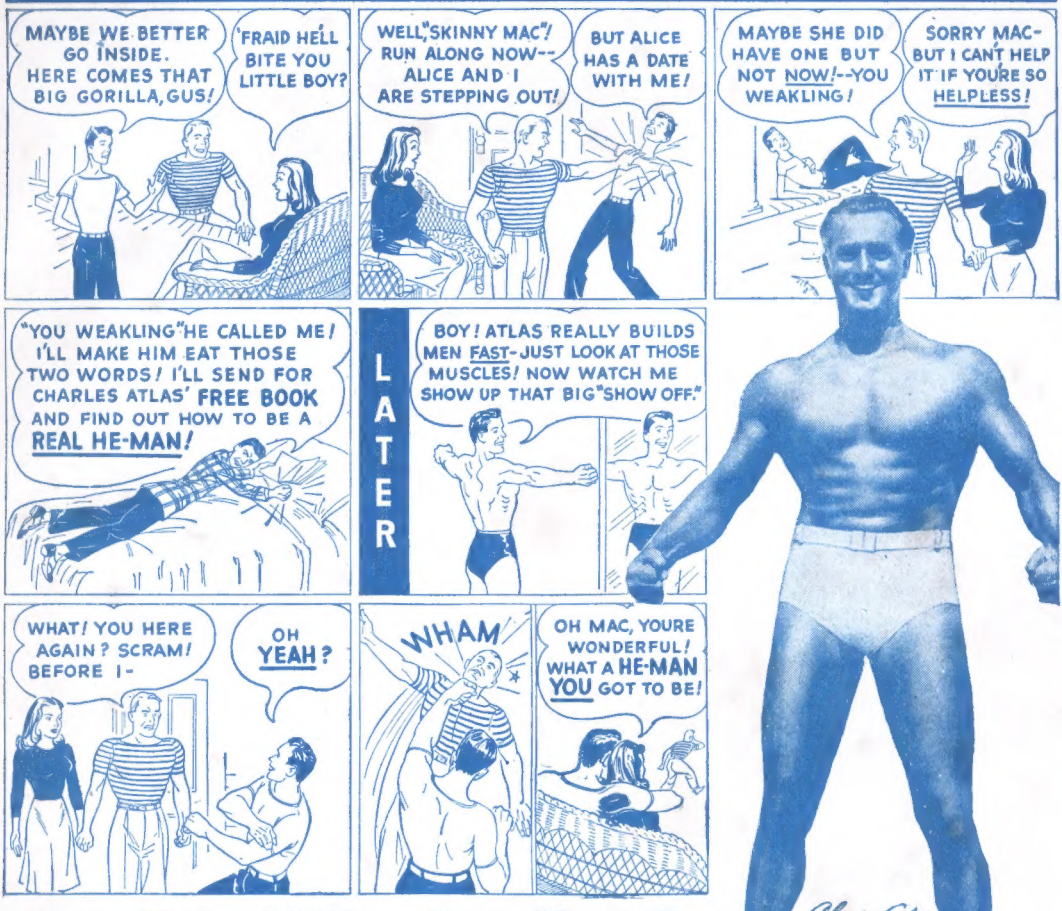
This gun needs repair. It has a unique bolt lock and gunsmiths here have no parts, and do not know where to secure them.

J. F. T., Georgia

ANSWER: The National Firearms Co. is no longer in business—and, I'm sorry to say, I do not know where parts may be secured.

I'm sure that the Kimball Arms Company of Woburn, Mass., can repair your shotgun. Why not get in touch with them?

HOW JUST TWO WORDS TURNED MAC INTO A HE-MAN!


MAYBE WE BETTER GO INSIDE. HERE COMES THAT BIG GORILLA, GUS!
'FRAID HE'LL BITE YOU LITTLE BOY?
WELL, "SKINNY MAC"! RUN ALONG NOW-- ALICE AND I ARE STEPPING OUT!
BUT ALICE HAS A DATE WITH ME!
MAYBE SHE DID HAVE ONE BUT NOT NOW!--YOU WEAKLING!
SORRY MAC- BUT I CAN'T HELP IT IF YOU'RE SO HELPLESS!
"YOU WEAKLING" HE CALLED ME! I'LL MAKE HIM EAT THOSE TWO WORDS! I'LL SEND FOR CHARLES ATLAS' FREE BOOK AND FIND OUT HOW TO BE A REAL HE-MAN!
LATER
BOY! ATLAS REALLY BUILDS MEN FAST- JUST LOOK AT THOSE MUSCLES! NOW WATCH ME SHOW UP THAT BIG "SHOW OFF."
WHAT! YOU HERE AGAIN? SCRAM! BEFORE I-
OH YEAH?
WHAM
OH MAC, YOURE WONDERFUL! WHAT A HE-MAN YOU GOT TO BE!

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